九KOWLOON城
龍WALLED CITY寨

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First edition

A special thanks to my Ma, Zara, Kabir, Joanna & Nabil
and to all my friends

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Prologue

Zihao's car glided along the pristine roads of Hong Kong, a beacon of opulence and modernity. As he sank into the plush embrace of his reclined seat, his gaze wandered over the sleek console that surrounded him. He sometimes forgot how lucky they were to have such a small population. Some of the places he saw on the news, like the North Indian Cultura Sphere of United Bharat, had unfathomably dense populaces.

Imagine being late home because there are too many people in your city. No job is ever worth commuting longer than 20 minutes.

It was a grim prospect and a far cry from the streamlined efficiency that defined Hong Kong. With a sigh of relief, Zihao closed his eyes and surrendered himself to the car's smooth motion.

'... In 200 metres, Kowloon Bridge.'

The digitised voice of the car's internal navigation system brought him back to the land of the living.

Zihao gave a contented sigh as the majestic white arches materialised at the lower edge of his car's windshield. An architectural marvel, the bridge was always the highlight of his journey home.

A mere hundred metres below the bridge flowed the iconic Kowloon River, a mighty man-made watercourse that branched into a labyrinthine network of creeks and streams, meandering through the nation to meet up with the ocean at the border. The citizens of Hong Kong rarely glimpsed the ocean because of the immense, impenetrable flood walls that lined the shoreline borders. These infamous walls were legendary among the few remaining coastal cities around the world.

Beyond the walls was the mysterious ocean, its expanses now owned and exploited for resource farming by private corporations. This vast swathe

of the planet remained shrouded in mystery to the billions of laypeople worldwide. It was so secluded that even during inter-country flights, the pervasive low-lying smog emanating from the ocean mining rigs blurred the distances between nations and prevented any glimpse of the ocean through the plane's windows.

As Zihao's car approached the mouth of the bridge, he looked to his right and saw the gentle stream of Kowloon River flow out under the bridge. He lowered his window and inhaled the earthy aroma of the river. In a city often devoid of natural smells, this part of Kowloon offered a rare, almost mystical encounter with the planet's raw fragrance.

Hong Kong's eccentric architecture was a sprawling canvas of abstract artistry: upside-down fountains, walkways that defied gravity, skyscrapers resembling hanging gardens rather than buildings where people worked, and entire gated suburbs of such complex verticality that often left many foreigners speechless. However, with such advanced urban design came the smells of sterility and safety.

Zihao watched families enjoying an afternoon by the river, a rare glimpse of community in the city. This comforting scene was a tonic compared to his current life of office work and mindless browsing through furniture catalogues at home. It was almost like fantasy from books and movies.

Wanting to see the other side of the river, Zihao righted his seat and peered through the left window. He anticipated the familiar sparkling azure currents and children laughing as they frolicked in the shallows with their trousers rolled up to their knees.

However, the images he saw as he passed between arches of the bridge was so inconsistent with his expectations that it seized his breath and held it captive.

Zihao tapped the brake in the footwell to disengage the car's autonomous driving mode and slowed down, craning his neck to the right for a better look.

In a heartbeat, his car slammed into the one ahead, snapping his head toward the dashboard. Green airbags exploded, cushioning the impact before deflating, which allowed him to see out the windshield. Despite the

bite of the seatbelt across his chest, Zihao couldn't tear his gaze from the water – or what seemed to be in it.

No... what in the world is—

Smash! Another car rammed into him from behind, whipping his head forward with a violent jolt. Now without inflated airbags, pain exploded in his neck and skull, raw panic surging through him. He groped for the door's release and tried to roll out, but he'd forgotten he was still bound by his seatbelt. He hung half inside and outside the car door like a tangled, stringed puppet.

Shit, what's going on?

Zihao wriggled and clawed at the seatbelt's release. Finally, it gave way and deposited him onto the asphalt in a disoriented heap. The biting wind atop the heights of the bridge lashed against his skin, and he felt warm blood snake down his forehead.

Staggering to his feet, his hand cradling his head, Zihao cast his gaze upwards. The sky, once a calm blue, now swarmed with drones and helicopters, a sudden onslaught of mechanical vultures descending upon the chaos below.

Huh? They weren't there before...

Zihao wasn't alone in his confusion. Vehicles lay abandoned in a chaotic sprawl, their occupants spilling out. Faces painted with a mix of anger, confusion and pain converged around him, drawn to the bridge's right edge. Hundreds were already huddling along that stretch of the bridge, peering over the railing, their screams and sobs becoming Zihao's new reality.

What did I see earlier in the river?

Despite his disorientation, Zihao also edged forward to the railing and inserted himself into a small gap between two whimpering onlookers.

Thousands of corpses floated where the river water should have been – a grotesque valley of decay and rot. Not a metre of the water was visible between the countless bodies in varying stages of decomposition: some were browned and leathery, still with the mark of flesh and even distinguishable faces, while others were nothing but hollow skeletons.

Overwhelmed by nausea, Zihao vomited over the railing. Then the

disgusting sight of his stomach's contents splattering on the drifting corpses below triggered further waves of sickness. Buffeted by winds on the bridge, he continued to retch until there was nothing left but stomach acid.

As the initial shock waned, Zihao became aware of his own physicality – the light-headedness that threatened to topple him over and the tightening constriction in his throat. The air around him transformed, no longer bearing the stench of death but carrying an indescribable aroma that made his eyes and nose stream.

How long had passed since he crashed? Seconds? Minutes? Hours?

He used his sleeve to clear his vision. Down below, another macabre audience had congregated along the riverbanks, their faces twisted in horror, while figures swathed in yellow hazmat suits mingled with stern-faced soldiers donning protective masks.

Suddenly, a black-gloved hand yanked Zihao from his trance. Turning him around was a figure in one of those yellow suits, his voice muffled yet tinged with an authoritative edge. 'Sir, you are at risk. Please walk towards the end of the bridge and board the bus!'

Before Zihao could muster a response, the man in the hazmat shoved him forward, leaving no room for hesitation.

Are those real corpses? Where are they from? Shit, it's getting hard to breathe. Just breathe, Zihao, fucking breathe!

People were being pushed into single and double files by the hazmat brigade, who had swarmed the area with an alarming speed. Zihao touched his forehead, finding the blood had stopped flowing, yet a fiery heat radiated from his skin.

A terrifying thought tightened his already constricted throat. The pervasive smell that stung his nostrils and eyes, the fever that was taking hold, the sudden appearance of the hazmats and the soldiers in full-face masks – they were all pieces of a terrifying puzzle falling into place.

The air itself had turned traitor. He could almost *taste* the disease in every breath he took.

The landscape of the lone bridge now had the appearance of a militarised zone. Red and yellow tape cordoned off both ends. A fleet of sleek, white,

double-decker buses at the far end awaited him. Grim-faced soldiers herded him and other dazed citizens towards the vehicles.

KOWLOON WALLED CITY

Central Kowloon

- Yu
- Yau
- Pak
- Chau Liu
- Kai Ching
- Tsin Wai
- Sung Wong
- Nga Tsin

East Kowloon

- Pik
- Mok Tse
- Tai Sheung
- Paku Ling
- Jo Dan Bali
- Tai Po
- Lung Chau
- Gri Neg
- Hung Hau
- Lohas Pak
- Poi Toi
- Watabay
- Ng Fait
- Sheu Toilan
- Po Lam Pak
- Kwan Oh
- Pikwan
- Wan Po
- Samka Tsuen
- Shui Wun
- Lam Tsuen

South Kowloon

- Ho Man Ting
- Feri Poyn
- Borek Ata
- Kai Tak
- Tsim Tsui
- Nam Bato
- Ma Tei
- Tai Kwun
- Depik
- Jadine Luk At
- Wong Nai
- Mag Azingap
- Wan Chai
- Kwun Shan
- Hap
- Haw Par
- Siu Ma Shan
- Cosuweibay
- Sai Wan
- Pok Fu
- Abadin

North Kowloon

- Taiku Xhing
- Shenzhen
- Pat Sin
- Lam Tsuen
- Tai Shan
- Man On Shan
- Tinsha

Western Reaches

- Kam Shan
- Tei Lung
- Ma Won
- Do Mil
- Sham Tsuen
- Yi Tsing
- Layo Nrok
- Mong Hang
- Tai Lam
- Nam Wan

1

The Law of the Land

'And the sky was stilled black, stripped of colour's breath. His creation gazed upwards in horror – like a child before a television screen staring at the static of a dead channel.'

-The Book of Lumen, Chapter 1, Verse 2:1

Keung controlled his breathing as he chased Jian through the civilian traffic, his boots pounding against the stone walkway still slick from yesterday's rain. He tried to steady his aim and fire a few times, but the sheer number of people made a clean shot impossible.

How the hell did Cheng land that first hit?! I hope he deals with those Yangs back there and catches up soon!

He winced as a sharp crackle came through the speakers in his peaked cap.

'Sir?'

It wasn't Tribune Cheng, as he had expected. It was Praefect Shing, the sharpshooter of their six-man unit.

'I hear you, Shing. Are you tracking my location?'

'Yeah. I'm cutting through to the terraces. Try and push Jian higher.'

'Got it!'

Ahead, Jian vaulted over a rusted railing, crashing into a crate of newspapers against a wall below. Loose pages flew through the humid

air as he picked himself up and ran to the right.

Keung took over the same railing, circumvented the fallen crates, and rushed after his prey through the still-whirling papers. He watched Jian's silhouette flicker under overhead neon signages and flashing LED panels rushing by his sides, barrelling towards a wide archway with a flashing sign above: *The Gujin Bazaar.*

He's long gone if he gets into a bazaar!

Keung's eyes flicked upwards, where he noticed a dense web of red and orange paper lanterns suspended above the archway. They were hanging off lines stretched taut between opposing balconies on the upper level. An idea struck.

Skidding to a stop, he raised his hand cannon, aimed at the anchor points on either side, and fired twice in quick succession.

The shots seared through several wires at once, sending the lanterns swinging down from both directions. They crashed together in the middle in a tangled mess, blocking the entrance to the bazaar through the red glow.

Jian whipped his head left and right, before finally darting left. Keung followed.

They tore up a narrow stairwell, the gap between them gradually reducing as Keung gained on the older man.

Five levels higher, Keung stepped through a doorway and the atmosphere changed in an instant. Gone were the humid alleyways and the press of bodies; he was now within the sanctity of a daoyinbo, a hallowed Dongist temple dedicated to the Light.

He walked down the middle aisle past massive, reflective pillars on either side. His footsteps echoed through the vast, cavernous interior, causing the numerous candles perched upon ledges beneath vibrant stained-glass panels to flicker, their flames glinting across the intricate mosaics decorating the walls and the tall, domed ceiling. An ethereal golden glow bathed the daoyinbo, a place where people believed the Light to be holiest.

Where the hell did he go?!

Keung's gaze swept across the scattered worshippers kneeling on the floor, facing the front in quiet meditation. He could hear the subtle drone of their

prayers. The air was thick with the scent of burning incense, its curling white smoke drifting from the suspended censers overhead. Every sound felt deafening in the temple's deep, reverent stillness.

His reflection flickered along the polished, mirror-like pillars, growing larger as he approached, warping around the curve, and shrinking away.

Then, Keung felt the air shift. A subtle creak of ceramic tile. Not his own.

His body tensed—

A hanging censer swung at his head.

He ducked, twisting as another came crashing down seconds later. Then a third struck his shoulder, sending a jolt of pain through his arm and chest before it shattered against the floor in a riot of sparks and embers.

Jian lunged from behind a pillar, his breath ragged, the chains of a fourth censer clutched in his fist. Smoke coiled around him as he lobbed it toward Keung one last time before bolting for the door at the far end.

Keung caught the swung censer, its momentum dragging his arm slightly before he stilled its motion and let it hang.

As he chased Jian through the side door, he exhaled and touched his cap.

'Come in, Shing!'

'What happened?'

'He's headed up! Be ready to shoot him!'

'Received.'

Jian was a whirlwind through the monk's quarters, shoving past startled scribes and novice-sages. Keung was right behind him, weaving through the narrow, decrepit halls, his focus locked on his target.

As he rounded a corner, he spotted an open window, its frame still swinging.

Keung rushed to it and glanced out and up to see Jian already ascending the cramped, parallel walls, leaping from one surface to the other.

Lunging forward, Keung gripped the frame and pulled himself through.

I can't fucking wall-hop like that. Better climb.

He reached up, dug his fingers into the uneven surface, and began scaling the wall hand over hand.

Above, Jian smashed through a window and hobbled through it, shards of

glass raining over Keung's cap. He swung himself up to the frame, seeing blood drip from its jagged corners.

At this rate, he'll jump from these heights rather than let us kill him!

Reaching through the broken window, Keung unlatched the frame and pushed it open. He hauled himself inside and onto a final stairwell – the last one before the terrace.

Above, he heard Jian grunt, followed by the heavy slam of doors swinging open.

Keung chased after his shadow, ascending three steps at a time. He burst onto the rooftops, high above on the 92nd level, greeted by the open air of Kowloon's black ceiling.

The skyline was a tangled urban sprawl of brick and flashing lights, but he was rapidly losing sight of his target. Jian ducked under pipes, sidestepped around protruding rods, hopped over gaps, his head whipping from side to side.

Keung gritted his teeth.

Damn it, Shing! I can't keep this up! Take him out already!

BANG!

The gunshot tore through the thick air, deafening in the open expanse.

Jian's body jolted, his right leg crumpling beneath him.

Keung's eyes widened.

He's still alive.

Groaning, Jian dragged himself forward, his fingers clawing at the rooftop. Crawling. *He's still alive... Why isn't Cheng here yet?*

'ARGGGHHH! FUCK! MY LEG!!'

A garish tableau of blood and flesh splattered across the terrace ground. Lieutenant Keung advanced towards his quarry, watching him inch away, dragging the shattered remains of his leg behind him.

What a sorry sight. The great Jian... now just a snivelling, dying rebel.

As Keung drew nearer, his hand cannon gripped in both hands but pointed downwards in a gesture of mercy, the air grew heavy. The fatally wounded man, in a last act of defiance or perhaps a plea for recognition, rolled over to face him. It had been almost two annui-cycles since they'd laid eyes on

one another.

Jian's gaunt face no longer had the strong, angled planes of a proud general. The patchy stubble and fuzzy moustache were at odds with the well-groomed man Keung remembered.

'They don't know… *You* don't know, Keung. God himself, I've touched *his* Light. It was so beautiful. The sun… It was just as the prophet Dong said it would be. Warm, full of His love. We… We need to return to the surface.'

The muscles of Keung's jaw tightened with anguish. 'You *know* that's not possible.'

Jian's face fell. Sweat dripped from his hairline as his breathing turned sharp. 'Hope you realise your man missed my head on purpose,' he wheezed, gazing past Keung into the vast horizon of District Yau's groundscrapers.

But Keung didn't offer any response.

'They still don't trust you?' Jian asked.

Keung knew he was trying to provoke a response, so he remained tight-lipped, his breathing shallow as he warred with what came next.

'Get on with it, Kingmaker,' Jian muttered, staring at Keung's unmoving hand. All they could do was tremble.

Gritting his teeth, Jian propped himself up on his elbow. 'You're going to leave me here to bleed dry, aren't you?'

There was no answer.

'… You're all f-fucking tyrants after all,' Jian sneered as his face contorted in agony, his eyelids drooping more with each passing second.

Keung took a deep, steadying breath and raised his weapon towards Jian's head, his knuckles white. 'I guess I'm still trying to fit in.'

With a deep exhale, Jian closed his eyes. Keung turned his face away, squeezing his hand around the hand cannon's grip. The trigger never felt tighter.

After hearing the dreadful crack of Jian's skull hitting the ground, Keung braved a look. He watched Jian's fingers slowly unfurl, his lips separating, the putrid smell of gases and liquids leaving his quarry's body. This was his first time seeing a corpse grow cold right after death.

'It's done. Let's return to the tower, sir,' a familiar voice came from behind

him.

Cheng, Keung's trusted partner and a Kingmaker of Tribunary rank, approached and placed a hand on his shoulder. They shared a moment of silence for the battered man sprawled in front of them. Cheng's pale, clean-shaven face was haggard and glistened with sweat. Despite his clear exhaustion, his hair remained tucked under his peaked officer's cap and his dark trench coat showed no signs of exertion, the epitome of an exemplary, composed Kingmaker.

Shrugging off Cheng's hand, Keung strode towards the open doors at the other end of the terrace, the ones he and Jian had burst through minutes earlier.

Cheng jogged to catch up. 'Whatever comes of this, I have your back, sir. As always. Don't forget Jian was a traitor and a mass murderer. You saved many lives by making sure his ended today.'

Keung continued walking in silence over abrupt elevations and potted plants in the terrace towards the exit.

'Is there anything you wanted to talk about, sir?'

'Yes. What will they do to his body?'

'Well, sir… It varies from region to region. We're in Yau country, so they're going to tie Jian's body to a crucifix for everyone to see, until the first signs of rot. But that's not our concern; our job is done. After our team reports back, let's all have a round of drinks at The Crescent. This is cause for—'

'Drinks? I'm thinking about how we should mourn Jian, not *partying!*' Keung removed his officer's cap and ran his hand through his sweaty hair. 'Jian was a devout Dongist; he'd want to be floated down the Memorial Pipes and into the Light! Not have Kowloon become his audience as he *decays*!'

Cheng nodded. 'You're right, sir. It is a perversion of Dongism, but by design. The Luen siblings will take every opportunity to punish Jian, even into the afterlife. There's nothing we can do about it now. Unless the Emperor says otherwise, they get the final say.'

Death should be the final sanctuary for every soul tormented by the cruelty of life. Not whatever this is, Keung thought…

****

After descending several flights of stairs, the two Kingmakers came to a rusty green door ajar on their right. Cheng shouldered it open for his superior, and they emerged into the bustle of Kowloon – an overpopulated underground society plagued by poverty.

Wide corridors with low ceilings layered with pipes, wires and yellowed halogen lights stretched before them in an impossible mesh. People walked shoulder to shoulder in and out of corridors of different widths bordered by storefronts. The flooring, once clean, white tiles, was now a pitted, brown path eroded by hundreds of years of pedestrian footsteps.

Keung and Cheng were on the 91st floor, the highest in the current building, called *groundscrapers* by Kowloonis. A cacophony of sounds filled the air – eager vendors shouted over one another in tense bargaining matches, while bustling crowds steadily flowed between them, their laughter and shouting blending in with the relentless clamour of construction. Homeless children darted everywhere, disguising their pickpocketing as games of tag. Dongist preachers attired in reflective silver robes called for penance. Mobile food vendors carried large trays of street snacks supported by ropes slung around their necks, their makeshift stalls bouncing against their bodies as they responded to customers calling them over. The smell of sizzling spices in oil mingled with the stench of sweat. Keung noticed a few individuals slipping masks over their noses and melting into the shadows, their eyes tracking the two Kingmakers.

This wasn't some busy office building, apartment, or shopping centre; the long corridors of these buildings were the actual streets of Kowloon. Most pedestrians travelled through groundscrapers because of the overcrowding in the narrow, ground-level alleys.

The sprawl of Kowloon meant there were almost no gaps between its groundscrapers. Walls were often knocked down and bridged onto their neighbouring buildings, connecting hundreds of different groundscrapers into a single, intricate network of streets and highways.

The constant flow of people made for an oppressive atmosphere, but Keung and Cheng moved undeterred. Their Kingmaker status, signified by their dark trench coats with golden-yellow accents, peaked officer caps and

air of authority, parted the sea of people before them.

Eventually, they arrived at the entrance for the King rail docking port. An inconspicuous locked door with no handle, right in the middle of the busy corridor. Keung swiped his King rail key fob near the door, and it swung open for them. They slipped in before anyone took notice, as the entrances to these ports were a close-kept secret. Inside was a small, nondescript room with nothing but some storage cabinets, a minicomputer and glass sliding doors leading to the suspended tracks.

This monorail system, called the King rail, carved a path through the groundscrapers and into key areas of Kowloon. Constructed less than two decades ago, it was the first of its kind and granted speedy travel into some of the most densely populated areas ever known to humanity. Despite its efficiency, it remained locked away from everyone but the Kingmakers, earning the loathing of Kowloon's public.

'Will you, or—?' Keung gestured at the small screen next to the sliding glass doors.

'Let me, sir.'

Cheng punched in their destination. They only waited a few minutes until their monorail arrived at the port. First, the glass dock doors opened, followed by the carriage doors. They boarded the carriage, which glided into motion after the doors closed, travelling in silence. The King rail seldom saw wide-open spaces; it was almost always wedged between buildings in dark tunnels or rushing through interiors. As the carriage sped through Ji Sia City, glimpses appeared of the thousands of lanterns that were strung between buildings hundreds of metres high.

Light flooded into the carriage as they rushed through a groundscraper, hundreds of people merely a blur past the windows, not even a metre away. The carriage shuddered, causing Keung to look at Cheng. 'Did we run over someone again?'

'Don't think so. People have gotten good at avoiding the rail when they feel it coming.'

Keung nodded anxiously as he settled back into his seat. He disliked using the King rail. These trains carved through groundscrapers and sped right

into packed streets. Communities that had existed peacefully for hundreds of generations now bore the scar of the King rail cutting through them, facing potential death on a daily basis.

The monorail glided into the heart of the underground world as it neared their destination of District Yu. It was the smallest but most affluent of the 66 districts of Kowloon, the Emperor's personal domain. At its centre stood the Yu Tower, a 30-story building reserved for the elite Kingmakers, the Yaozhi family, and their imperial throne.

The tower was an architectural marvel, supposedly inspired by the ancient surface civilisation of Zhongguo. It featured sloping ceramic-tiled rooftops on every floor, raised pavilions, and an ancient, otherworldly sort of aura. No other building in District Yu could exceed eight stories, a visual reminder of where power coalesced.

Despite being the tallest building in its district, Yu Tower was overshadowed by the surrounding districts, where groundscrapers at its borders shot beyond seventy storeys. From above, this stark contrast gave the capital district a fragmented appearance, its perfect circular border and uniform terraces clashing with the chaotic, greebled textures of the rest of Kowloon's rooftops.

The four King rail tracks were the only physical connection with the outside world. Emerging straight from the shadows of Yu's neighbouring buildings, they stretched high above the district from its four sides, soaring across the airspace until they disappeared into the docking bays of the tower at the district's centre.

The carriage granted Keung a rare bird's-eye view. It felt like flying, a sensation he could only briefly experience here with Yu's low buildings, away from the chaos in the rest of Kowloon.

Cheng and Keung's bodies swayed from inertia as the carriage halted inside the mouth of the tower's docking port, 15 levels high. The doors slid open, and they both walked outside to the port, where other Kingmakers were departing and hailing other carriages.

'I'll wait for the others in the changing rooms, sir,' Cheng said as they shook hands. 'Are you going up to General Denzhen's office now?'

Keung's gaze fell to the floor. 'I forgot I still have to inform him. They once called each other brothers, you know.'

'Do you want me to come with you, sir? I can help.'

Yes, I wish you could, but only if I didn't have to ask for it.

'No, that won't be necessary,' Keung said softly.

They parted ways, and Keung headed to the nearest lift. The pristine, gleaming tiles and soft lights in the halls of the Yu Tower were a stark contrast to what the rest of Kowloon looked like. The corridor he was walking down featured breathtaking murals from *The Book of Memory,* its sacred scenes spilling off the ceiling and onto the walls, as if the artist had thought its beauty too great to keep the art contained to a single surface.

Busy Kingmakers rushed by; the lower rank centurions wore a plain uniform of a dark collared shirt, baggy trousers and a red sash tied around their waist, while their superiors strutted around in golden-striped trench coats identical to the ones Keung and his team wore. As had been the case since his birth, he felt eyes following him. This came with being the son of the legendary Dragon, General Denzhen, and the nephew of Emperor Puyin.

Keung slid open the grain-paper doors of the dojo, intending to take a shortcut to the lifts. Inside, a Kingmaker captain was leading a class of centurions through advanced martial forms, all twenty students wearing singlets and loose-fitting training pants. Keung padded around the perimeter, walking past jade emerald pillars and ornate dragon statues, doing his best to avoid drawing attention. However, the Emperor's nephew was hard to miss, and almost everyone's attention shifted towards him.

As Keung neared the dojo's exit, the sergeant's voice boomed, 'Training is *still* in progress, and I am *still* here!'

The class snapped back to their forms – horse stance, left fist, right fist, neutral stance, and then a round-house kick. The sound of fists whipping and thick cotton pants ruffling made Keung miss his days as a centurion. Life had been so much simpler.

At the other end of the training dojo, Keung reached a sliding paper door that led to the lift. He pressed the button to call it and a minute later, it rose

to his level. Inside were two other Kingmakers.

The lift rose and stopped once, offloading the two Kingmakers before continuing towards the twenty-fifth floor, where Keung disembarked and made his way to his father's chambers.

The level containing the generals' offices echoed with his footsteps. It was rare to find them there because of their packed schedule and responsibilities. Unlike the lower floors, level 25 was sterile and utilitarian in design, washed out by cool white lights and plain, square ceramic tiles.

Keung stood outside the door to his father's office before buzzing its ringer, a small circular button on the side of the frame. The crest of the Yaozhi family at its top edge reminded him of his significance; without his ancestors, Kowloon would be nothing more than millennia-old rubble.

There was a lengthy thirty-second wait before the door slid open.

Stepping inside, the wait made sense. General Denzhen stood with his back to the door, bent over the disarray of papers and hologram readers on his desk. Keung wondered how his father maintained order amidst such chaos. Denzhen still wore his olive-green, baggy trench coat, reserved for generals, distinguished from the well-fitting Kingmaker officer coats by its dark red arm stripes.

On the right-hand wall of the small office were three weathered visitors' chairs. Keung settled into one and it creaked under his weight.

'Jian is dead, Ba,' Keung revealed, his gaze distant, fixed on the wall ahead.

At this, Denzhen spun around and gaped. 'What do you mean? You found him? I thought you were following a cold trail?'

'Wasn't as cold as we thought. When Jian ran, Shing mortally wounded him. I only offered him mercy.'

Denzhen approached Keung and sat beside him. 'I'm so sorry, son. I didn't think your team would find him so fast. Had I known, I would have gone myself or sent Captain Aiguo or maybe Shen—'

'It's okay, Ba. I'm as capable as any of them.'

'You misunderstand me, it's nothing to do with capability. Dealing with Jian wasn't your burden to take on. Until now, I'd imagined one of us Dragons would end up confronting him. Not my son.'

Keung studied the man who'd raised and trained him for as long as he could remember. Denzhen's curly hair and short beard had been increasingly unkempt for the last few months, which coincided with the Kingmakers getting closer to finding Jian. The scar on his cheek, a trophy from a war fought by the elders many annui-cycles ago, seemed more prominent than usual as well.

'I knew him as well as anyone else; this is a burden we all share.'

'Not true, Keung. You don't have the hands of a killer. How many people have you had to shoot? And of those few, how many did you know personally? No, it's not your burden to take, and damn me for not being careful and sending you, anyway!'

Denzhen shot up from his seat. 'I'm sorry, son.'

Although Keung found some solace in his father's words, they reinforced why so few fellow Kingmakers had ever attempted to befriend him. His father's unwavering protection had always been a comfort that Keung accepted without question in his childhood. However, as he matured, he realised he had the autonomy to reject this overprotectiveness when it became excessive. Now, Keung questioned whether he should embrace his father's consolation.

'Oh, shit…' Denzhen muttered. 'Keung, do you know what it means to be General Jian's executioner?'

'What?'

Denzhen pinched the bridge of his nose and closed his eyes. 'Should've sent…'

'Ba, what are you trying to say?'

'What you did to Jian isn't going to sit well with the other Kingmakers.'

At that moment, his father's comment hit him with full force. Keung hadn't considered how others in the tower might react. He hadn't just killed a prolific Yang terrorist; he'd killed a father figure to many Kingmakers.

Denzhen continued. 'It wouldn't have mattered if it had been me or the captain who ended him. But you're young, Keung, so incredibly young. The love many have for Jian is almost as old as I am.'

'Thank you for warning me.' Keung's face tensed in an effort to appear

indifferent. Yet, he couldn't suppress the subtle tightening of muscles along his jaw and a faint frown.

His mind raced. *Am I on the path to becoming every Kingmaker's enemy?*

'Be careful, son. Emotions run high while people mourn. They'll be eager to point the finger. I'll do what I can to maintain discipline for the next few menses-cycles at least.'

Keung shook his head. 'No, please don't. Nothing will happen to me. If anyone has any grievances, let them come to me,' He rose from his seat and faced the door.

'Son—'

'No, I have to go! I need to walk this off. Thank you, sir.' Keung exited his father's chambers as Denzhen looked on, his forehead furrowed.

2

Crucifixion

In the dim, dank changing rooms on the lower floors of Yu Tower, Tribune Cheng stood alone in front of a cracked sink. He splashed cold water over his weary face to banish the grime and exhaustion that draped over him like a shroud. The room, with its rows of mostly empty lockers, felt like a mausoleum. But it was a silence he craved.

The horrific events of that morning haunted Cheng. Gunfire and screams echoed in his mind, vivid flashbacks of storming the apartment in Ji Sia City and uncovering a hidden nest of Yangs. He would never forget the moment he, Keung and Yutai had pointed their guns into the room and all three saw Jian. Keung's sharp intake of breath as he grappled with who he was staring at. No one could have predicted such a turn of events.

Returning to the moment, Cheng was terrified for Keung. His friend was about to enter a whole new world of struggle after killing Jian. Cheng's position as Tribune afforded him the second-highest rank in the detachment, or the de facto leadership when Keung wasn't around. He reminded himself that he had everything he needed to protect Keung from the others in the tower.

As he waited by the sink, worry for Keung gnawing at his nerves, Ushi, Tao and Shing emerged through the sliding doors. Their presence filled the room, but the team was incomplete. Cheng could hear the indistinct murmurs between Ushi and Tao, and the sound of Shing's massive PAW12

rifle thumping against his back, but no one else. Yutai hadn't appeared yet, and Lieutenant Keung, the one Cheng was most concerned about, was also absent. *I hope his meeting with the General is going okay.*

Glancing back, with water trickling down his pale face, Cheng saw Praefect Shing take a seat on the central bench of the changing room. As the group's marksman, Shing's post-mission routine remained unchanged; he disassembled his PAW12, then meticulously wiped each part with a microfibre cloth.

Rubbing down the main barrel, Shing caught Cheng's gaze and raised an eyebrow. 'You good?'

Cheng frowned, debating whether to ask why Shing had injured Jian instead of killing him. *No, it's not worth it with him.* He turned away.

Praefects Tao and Ushi were in a huddle by their lockers behind Shing. Ushi had removed his shirt, his bulky frame on display. He always claimed his fast metabolism made him feel hot, hence his frequent garment removal. But everyone knew the truth; he just loved showing off his muscly physique. His skin, a shade darker than others in the room because of his southern heritage, was covered in bruises and cuts. Cheng remembered that he and the others had stayed behind to fend off the remaining Yangs while he, Keung, and Shing chased after Jian. Ushi's battered body bore the marks of the fierce encounter.

Tao, Ushi's closest friend in the team, had his curly hair tied up in a loose plait, a post-mission habit. His bruised face was set in a grim expression as he spoke with Ushi, no doubt discussing the events of earlier that day. Cheng watched Tao's fingers absently toying with the Dongist prayer beads around his neck, but he couldn't help but wonder what was taking Praefect Yutai so long.

Knowing him, probably somewhere in the tower, caught up in conversation.

'Keung actually killed him. Big boy!' Shing's voice dripped with sarcasm, a faint smirk playing at the corners of his mouth. The room fell silent as everyone turned to look at him. Only the running water in the sink prevented the room from descending into absolute silence.

'Anyone else surpr—'

'Shut the *fuck up,*' Ushi's weary, scratchy voice conveyed his irritation.

Shing's smirk only widened. He twisted in his seat, half-turning to face Ushi behind him. 'What are *you* crying about now?'

'We all know what you did. You could have killed Jian instantly. One clean shot. But *you* wanted to fuck around, play sadist, toy with the lieutenant! If Jian got away, it would've been worth it if only to see the Dragons make you pay!'

'Did he?' he scoffed. 'Jian still died, didn't he?'

'Yeah? Nearly fucking up the mission wasn't enough, you gotta talk back like a smartass too?!' Suddenly, the bench screeched forward as Ushi kicked it hard, jolting Shing to his feet, parts of his beloved rifle almost falling over the edge.

'The fuck is your problem!?' Shing snapped, clutching the body of his PAW12 protectively. 'You damage my gun and I'll damage your fucking head—'

Tao let out a laugh, holding Ushi back with one hand. 'Let's all stop pretending like Shing missed on purpose and isn't just covering up for his shit aim,' he said dryly, watching them glare daggers at each other. But Shing chuckled briefly at the comment, righted the bench, and sat back down to resume his cleaning.

Cheng's mouth twisted as he turned and headed toward his locker. Crossing the room, he mulled over Shing's words.

I also thought Keung wouldn't kill Jian, ask me to do it instead. Cheng opened his locker. *Never thought I'd see the day when Shing and I would agree on anything.*

As he unholstered his RS7 hand cannon and placed it inside his locker, he froze momentarily, his body tensing as he caught sight of Keung standing in the doorway. The faint flicker of startlement caught the room's attention, prompting everyone to turn and see Keung as well, except for Shing, who paid him no mind and continued wiping down his rifle.

How long has he been standing there? Cheng wondered.

Lieutenant Keung nodded at them all. 'Good work, brothers. After many cycles of hunting Jian, we've finally killed him. Today wasn't easy, but our

teamwork got us over the line. You can go home and rest. That's it, I guess. Dismissed.'

The lieutenant was about to turn on his heel when Cheng raised his hand. 'Ah, sir… A word before you go?'

Keung looked at him and gave an upward flick of his head.

'What did the general say? Are you okay, sir?' Cheng spoke softly, making sure the others didn't hear.

Keung nodded without looking Cheng in the eye, which made him impossible to read.

'Don't worry about me, okay? The General said everything's fine.'

Cheng pursed his lips, unconvinced. 'If you say so, sir.'

As Keung turned to leave, he whirled back around. 'Uh, brothers, one more thing. Jian's passing will be a difficult time for many. I'm sure news has spread that we were the ones behind it, so stay calm and expect reactions. Especially you, Ushi. Please don't rip anyone's head off if they say something stupid. My father's office is open to you all if you want to report any inappropriate behaviour.'

Keung nodded at Cheng one last time, then walked out.

****

Back in his private chambers on the highest floors of the royal palace, Keung lay on the side of his bed and closed his eyes, drifting to sleep…

Beeep. Beeep. Beeep. Beeep.

After what seemed like mere minutes, Keung pried his eyes open, rubbing them in surprise as he saw his sleeping quarters had darkened with the onset of Kowloon's dimming.

Must've been out longer than I thought.

His holocommunicator, which was beside his royal double bed, was still beeping with an incoming call. With a weary stretch, he picked it up.

'Hello?'

'Is this Keung?' A man's voice sounded down the line. Stern, almost military-like.

Frowning, Keung pushed himself up to a seated position. 'Who's this? You realise this is a private channel. Identify yourse—'

'You're going to burn in the darkest depths of hell for what you did to General Jian. The man who saved Kowloon is rotting on a crucifix because of you. Make sure those bedroom doors are locked tight tonight because we're going to—'

Keung hung up, blood rushing in his ears. He could feel the malice dripping from every word. He knew it had to be from a Kingmaker because only they had the means of prank calling his personal channel, but this one was different. Confronting. *Are there really Kingmakers in the tower who are planning on hurting me?*

No. They'd never.

He sat in his grand room in silence, cloaked in darkness and warmth from the heaters his father always turned on at this time.

The holographic display on the table at the far end of his chamber told him it was an hour past the dimming, when another side of Kowloon would be waking. A criminal side that blended in with the nightlife. The clubs roared louder, the strip clubs lifted their curtains, drugs and arms dealers traded with impunity, mercenaries walked door to door extorting and bribing shopkeepers, and illegal modification shops switched on the neon lights above their front doors: *Now welcoming all customers!*

There was an unspoken truce between Kowloon's post-dimming life and the authorities who roamed during the daytime work-cycles. 'Stay in your corner of Kowloon, and we won't interfere with your business.'

That went both ways.

Sitting on his bed, Keung wondered what Jian's corpse looked like right now. He imagined thousands streaming by the crucifix. Some people wouldn't recognise the lifeless face of the once great man who'd saved Kowloon during the District Rebellions 25 annui-cycles ago, while others would shake their head at Jian's pitiful end.

Keung's stomach twisted as images of Jian rotting on the cross arose, his lifeless gaze asking, *'Is this what I deserve?'*

His head began to throb. Suddenly Keung found himself missing the comforting presence of his father. Rising from his bed, he walked to his study desk, where his trench coat was draped over the back of his chair.

He slipped into the coat, its golden stripes accentuating the arms and side skirts, and then proceeded to his personal armoury through a sliding door next to his bed. Rifles, light machine guns, energy pistols and other gadgets lined the sound-proofed walls of the room. He grabbed his dependable RS7 hand cannon and left his room.

As Keung stood inside the lift, staring at the row of buttons, he imagined what his father might say to console him. Would he remind him of his accomplishments? Rising to the highest rank attainable before becoming a Dragon – a lieutenant? Would he speak of the ancient Yaozhi blood that coursed through his veins, and emphasise the vital role his ancestors had played in founding Kowloon? Or would he simply acknowledge Keung's humanity and reassure him it was okay to feel the way he did?

Then Keung's constant companion, the voice of self-doubt, raised its head again. As it always did.

That's it. Go run to Daddy. Let him reassure you. Why take control of the situation yourself? You're a Yaozhi. Others do shit for you. Even if it has to be poor old Ba.

No wonder everyone respects you.

Its bitter sarcasm stung. His finger still hovered over the floor button engraved with the character "25". Then, in an abrupt change of heart, he pulled back.

No, not this time. I have a choice in this. I'm going to do Jian right. His finger moved to the button for Level 15: the King rail.

The late hour had emptied the port of most Kingmakers. On one of the four tracks, a King rail carriage sat idle behind a short glass wall, as if waiting for him. Approaching the console on the glass next to the doors, he entered his destination: Ji Sia City. The place where he had killed Jian. The doors whispered open, and he stepped inside.

As the carriage sped towards District Yau's capital, Keung paced, pondering his next steps. All his plans defied Yau's laws, particularly because Jian was Yang, but Keung hoped his position as Emperor Puyin's only nephew would protect him from severe repercussions. The relationship between the Ji Sia and the Kingmakers was already fraught, worsened by the lingering

resentment over last year's Yau bombings, orchestrated by the Yangs. Yet, Keung kept reminding himself, *It's just one body. It's just one body.*

If he could retrieve Jian's corpse from his crucifix, a secretive and speedy cremation would be the only option, despite open flames being illegal across Kowloon.

Less than ten minutes later, the King rail glided into the familiar docking port of Ji Sia City, stirring memories of standing here with Cheng just hours earlier. Keung found himself missing him. Kingmakers seldom walked the streets of Kowloon alone. However, Keung knew asking for help would be a waste of time. His friend's unwavering sense of caution and protective nature would never permit him to join such a reckless mission.

Keung slipped through the plain grey door of the docking port and onto the bustling street. The activity hadn't waned since he was last here a couple hours ago, even as the dimming fell up here on the 90th level. At these heights, it usually cleared out the streets. The fact that people were still milling about in groups, gossiping, meant those with time to spare had left their homes to search for Jian's crucifix. An execution like his would be a ceremonious event for the district.

Right now, he needed to find the crucifix fast. Keung knew the Ji Sia would place Jian's body in a prominent position as a symbol of victory against the fearsome Yangs. Tapping his wrist projector, Keung accessed the Kowlooni Network, a monolithic digital web that connected everyone to news, entertainment and business.

He didn't need to search for long as the front page featured the breaking news of Jian's death. And the headline revealed his location.

The Luen siblings announce Jian's crucifixion in the Gujin Bazaar.

Knowing the name of his destination, Keung pulled up the local area map, a hologram that hovered above his wrist. The orange holographic display was three-dimensional, rendering the local map around him. Fine white grid lines travelling in the three dimensions and thick blue lines showed the physical shape of the interior streets. Each street glowed red to varying degrees, simulating the density of foot traffic.

Other people in the street turned and stared, their faces agape at the

advanced technology. The intricate map displayed the complex network of interior streets, stairways, vents, and alleys that teemed with life. Consulting the search bar at the top of the hologram, Keung typed in the four Yue characters – Gu, Jin, Ba and Za. The map panned to a nearby area, revealing Jian's location.

Even after his death, I'm still hunting for him.

Keung tapped on the hologram and a small information box materialised in the air:

Gujin Complex, Yau.
Established in 334 T.T. 292.
Under Luen jurisdiction.

Keung selected his destination, and a red line appeared, showing the quickest route to the Gujin complex. Despite never having been to this bazaar, he knew what to expect. He followed the crimson line on the hologram, determined to honour Jian's memory – even at the cost of defying the laws he had vowed to uphold as a Kingmaker.

He zipped down narrow stairwells, then descended footbridges and clambered onto lower terraces. He slid down angled rooftops, earning himself scraped elbows and bruised shins for his efforts; his balcony leaps had his heart racing at times as he traversed wide gaps high above bustling alleyways. Squeezing through a narrow crack in the pavement, he tumbled into a darkened barber shop, where he opened a window with unsteady hands and scrambled down the rickety fire escape. Four levels down, he found a clothing line attached to its rusted railing, stretched taut between the groundscrapers. Keung grabbed a damp towel draped over the line and zip-lined across. The moisture made his grip precarious, and his palms slipped, sending him crashing onto a lower terrace where a pile of garbage broke his fall with a loud thud. Finally, Keung stood up and rubbed his elbow as he limped towards the glow of the bazaar.

Navigating Kowloon was like taming a feral beast. Everyone who grew up on the streets knew how to saddle and ride it. Most people lived and died in the same area where they were born, so local shortcuts like loose panels, hidden manholes, and crowded conditions were a part of daily life.

But to some who had lived a sheltered life, Kowloon remained wild and unpredictable, a monster revealing its teeth when you stared down its maw. Sometimes, Keung didn't know how it saw him: as an experienced master or a timid child waiting to be knocked down and swallowed whole.

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The bazaar was pulsating with light and sound, filled with crowds numbering in the tens of thousands. Massive LED billboards, their screens flickering with Yue characters, hung above the street that stretched from one end of the bazaar to the other. On either side rose two colossal groundscrapers, each lined with long balconies that ran parallel to the ground-level thoroughfare. These balconies stacked thirty stories high, each level with its own shops, stalls, and people. Vertical neon signs climbed the faces of both buildings, advertising the chaotic assortment of services crammed into every floor: noodle stands beside beauty salons, shoe shops next to clubs, and high-end fashion boutiques squeezed in alongside fast-food joints.

Keung winced as his head began to pound from the music and the dazzle of the neon lights. Street performers with wild face tattoos played instruments and twirled with abandon, angling for spare change. Keung watched popular influencers from the Kowlooni Network interviewing randoms in the hope of producing entertaining content for their virtual audiences. The air buzzed with a blend of laughter, conversation, and the steady bass of party music from the upper balconies.

Grand bazaars were vibrant melting pots where diverse cultures from various regions within a district converged. Nearly every district boasted one. In these places, people indulged in their baser instincts, losing themselves in a whirlwind of indulgence in the form of extravagant spending and consumption, drugs, sex and violence.

Despite his headache, Keung fought back a smile at the infectious excitement of the atmosphere. *Shing and Yutai would love it here.*

Head on a swivel, Keung scanned for Jian's crucifix, knowing it would be displayed for all to see. Countless shoulders pushed him back every second step he took; the sheer liveliness of the place even obscured his own

presence. There were almost no eyes on him, which felt so alien that he glanced at his Kingmaker trench coat to check he was still wearing it.

But just as a Kingmaker was invisible in the bazaar, so was everything else. Keung tipped his head back, searching for the hanging crucifix amidst the sensory overload without success. Everything mirrored the surrounding disorder. The multilevel balconies to his left and right overwhelmed his sense of scale. Even the balcony railings, burdened by the weight of leaning spectators, appeared to teeter over the edge.

A couple of Luen gangsters swaggered past Keung wearing thick, bright-orange, sleeveless jackets and dark cargo pants. He overheard some of their words.

'… that bloody Jian…'

'… a lashing in hell for every soul he took…'

Lost in thought, Keung bumped face-first into a hulking man, who turned and glared at him.

'Aye, you fuckin' blind?!' He was bulky enough to be a bouncer but wore flashy clothes, as if he was a patron of a club instead: a trendy, high-collared leather jacket with hexagonal seams, and baggy pants with a ribbed design that cuffed just above the calf.

However, as soon as the large man's eyes darted to Keung's peaked cap with its gold stripes, his demeanour changed and he slid out of the way, mumbling an apology.

Several minutes later, Keung spotted a massive, box-shaped clock suspended from the ceiling, its four analogue faces glowing softly with neon-lit hands.

Beneath it, there was a crucifix bathed in the beams of two massive spotlights. He thought he could see Jian's body tied to it, but the clock was too high and Keung couldn't focus as he was constantly being jostled by people.

Is that Jian or someone else?

Looking to his right through the shifting crowd, Keung spotted a small kitchen at the edge of the street. Patrons perched on stools beneath a concrete awning, eating in front of a rectangular service window. With a

surge of energy, he darted toward it, his eyes locking briefly on the chef – an older woman with grease-stained sleeves and a face etched by years of toil over roaring flames. Her wrinkled, narrow eyes widened as the warm glow of the kitchen illuminated Keung's figure.

Before the cook could utter a word, Keung dragged an empty stool into position and vaulted onto the awning above the diners. He scaled the brick wall, gripping every crack and crevice he could find until he reached the railing of the first-floor balcony.

Turning to face the bazaar, Keung stood on the lip of the balcony, holding onto the guard railing behind him. His fingers felt the brush of people walking past. Focusing once more, Keung strained to see the crucifix clearer. He frowned. Something didn't look right with the limbs. They stuck out at a strange angle. Even the head didn't appear to be slumping down.

He tensed and forced his eyes closed in anticipation of the impending intrusion. With a faint beep, his Eye whirred to life. When he opened his eyes again, an aqua blue filter washed over his left eye's vision, yellow lines outlining the geometric shapes around him. People, railings, and signs all stood out in stark contrast against the backdrop of the bazaar.

The Eye scanned the surroundings, detecting Yue characters from signs and advertisements and offering translation options for various dialects from distant districts. Keung seldom activated his implant as the fusion of man and machine made his skin crawl. Its existence was always a reminder of the foreign presence lurking just beneath the surface.

Amidst the unease that accompanied the Eye's activation, Keung focused on the cross. The image of the crucifix soon joined the yellow outline of the clock. Slowly, he zoomed in, desperate for any sign of Jian.

What he saw wasn't human! It was a straw mannequin!

It can't be!

A wave of shock and dismay crashed over Keung as he realised someone had already taken Jian down.

The first sign of rot, Keung reminded himself. *He's meant to be there until he rots! Did the Yang take him? Am I the first to notice?*

The bazaar's vibrant allure now felt suffocating as he struggled to

comprehend the implications of his discovery.

3

The People's Champion

12 minutes to the 13th hour, an hour before the dimming.

'Breaking News from Yau… We already have our journalist on the scene. Jeni, go ahead.'

Jeni Laozi raised her voice to be heard above the din.

'This is Jeni Laozi, reporting live from the Gujin Bazaar, where we've just witnessed the unexpected and gruesome execution of the legendary General Jian. An emotional crowd numbering in the hundreds of thousands has gathered here in the Yau capital. A remarkable sight.

'We all remember General Jian, who deserted his post as a Dragon of Yu two annui-cycles ago. But our older audiences may recall his pivotal role in ending the District Rebellions back in '61. As you can see, the Ji Sia are busy stringing up his crucifix in the bazaar.'

Jeni spoke under her breath to her cameraman, *'Fan, see if you can get an angle on those Luen boys.'*

The camera panned to the right and zoomed in, showing six red-faced Ji Sia gangsters heaving on a rope. Jian's corpse, with its missing right leg, hung stiff underneath the bindings holding him to the cross.

Jeni continued, her voice quivering with emotion.

'I can now confirm the executioner was Keung Yaozhi, nephew of Emperor Puyin and son of the great Dragon, General Denzhen. A tough position

for the general, no doubt, his son slaying the man he once considered a brother-in-arms.

'Jian's death has sent shock waves throughout Kowloon, with sources claiming the news has reached as far down as the Huang Wildlands. It's uncertain how the citizens of Kowloon will react, given Jian's complex legacy both as a legendary strategist and a defector to the Yang…'

Jeni's attention shifted as she muttered, '*Fan, Fan, track in on Jian, if you can...'*

The camera closed in on Jian rising higher and higher into the air.

'… This tragic and abrupt end to a two annui-cycle chase leaves Kowloon in a state of uncertainty. With the revelation of Keung Yaozhi's involvement, questions will no doubt arise about the complex web of relationships among those who still admire Jian, Keung Yaozhi, and the lords and ladies of Kowloon, who are demanding retribution against the Yang. Stay tuned as we continue our coverage of this developing story.'

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23 minutes past the 19th hour, a few hours after the dimming.

Keung's legs burned from climbing up twenty levels. Now he was almost eye level with the cubed analogue clock, which hung from a thick, wrought iron chain that disappeared into the darkness above. Strangely, the noise level was still as overwhelming all the way up here.

Pivoting on his heel, Keung spotted a shop owner across the way, a serene-looking older man whose eyes widened at the sight of a Kingmaker walking up to the counter in front of his cramped stall.

'Uh, h-hello good s-sir,' he stammered. 'Enjoying yourself up h-here? Can I be of service?'

Keung's gaze swept over the shelves of plastic toys, key rings, stationery, and electronic gizmos. He got straight to the point, his voice urgent.

'Did you see who they placed on the cross?'

'Y-yes, sir. Jian of the Yang. Shushu and Lien announced his capture over the bazaar's top-level speakers. They're all celebrating back at the station, I hear.'

Shushu and Lien. Must be the local Ji Sia patrol, Keung thought. 'Why's there a dummy on the cross, then? Who took Jian down?'

The shop owner's brow furrowed.

'W-why, sir, I thought your people did? Three men wearing gold-striped trench coats rappelled from the ceiling and hauled the body to Upper Gujin. It's only been, what, not even an hour? Everyone's been taking photos of that mannequin they left in its stead. We thought maybe the siblings gave the order.'

Then maybe word hasn't reached the Ji Sia yet. But a couple of rogue Kingmakers defying local law will only make matters worse.

'How do I get to Upper Gujin?' he demanded.

The shop owner pointed a trembling hand toward the right, along the crowded balcony. 'Th-there's a fire-escape door that way, sir. A red one. But I've never seen a soul go through it. Light knows what's beyond. Far as I know, it's a shortcut to Upper Gujin, some maintenance tunnel. Otherwise, you need to descend to the bottom level of the bazaar again and find the highway.'

Keung craned his head back and caught a flash of red for a brief second as people rushed past.

Turning back to the shop owner, he forced a tight-lipped smile. 'Thank you, sir.'

He withdrew two heavy coins from his pocket and dropped them on the counter.

'This is for your help.'

'N-no need, sir. No need. To be of service to the Kings is payment enough!' He tried to return the coins, but Keung shook his head and stalked off, processing what he'd just learned.

****

The red door squeaked open, revealing only darkness beyond. Keung's silhouette cast shadows on the ground as light from behind him spilt into the mysterious space. Music from the bazaar pounded at Keung's back, but as he stepped forward and closed the door behind him, it soon faded to muted thuds. The air inside was thick and humid, clinging to Keung's skin.

He tugged at the collar of his shirt beneath his coat and armour, trying to find some relief.

Fiddling with the side of his cap, Keung activated a strip of white light on the visor's edge to illuminate the dark corridor. Despite the powerful beam, the light didn't show any end; it faded into black as if it dared not venture further. He stood motionless for a moment and took in his surroundings: damp concrete walls just two metres apart, their top edges stained with constant leakage, and a low, bowed ceiling made of rotten wooden beams. The smell of sewage hung in the air. The ground was a mishmash of cracked, pitted cobble stone, with piles of dust accumulating where it met the walls.

Keung could hear the squeaks of sewer rodents scurrying in the oppressive darkness beyond the reach of his light. He wished he was back in the corridors of the Yu Tower instead. He activated his holocommunicator map to check whether this decrepit route to Upper Gujin was available. As the orange holographic display appeared above his wrist, he groaned.

No such luck. Appears I'm the first King through this area.

With a few more taps, Keung enabled the passive mapping tool, to document his intended route. This would ensure he was the last Kingmaker to navigate it without guidance. Satisfied, he switched off his holocommunicator, waved his trench coat's skirt aside, and set off with a firm grip on the hand cannon on his hip.

Startled by the sudden scuttle of a sewer rodent behind him, Keung drew his gun and swung it around, aiming into the darkness, only to find nothing there. He holstered it again with a sigh. Living in Kowloon meant you were always surrounded by people; solitude was a luxury many craved, a feeling Keung didn't share right now.

As the path continued straight ahead, he began to question whether it really led to Upper Gujin. The echo of dripping water looped tortuously in Keung's ears as he struggled to find any sign of stairs or ladders.

I hope my aching legs are a sign I'm walking up an incline and not because I'm unfit.

As he continued walking, his visor light glinted off something on the right side up ahead. It was a square corrugated sheet of tin leaned against the

wall. Someone had scrawled the characters "Upper Gujin" across it in white spray paint: *Zhang, Gu, Jin.*

What a relief. Thought I'd need to stay in here longer.

Keung lifted the tin sheet and shifted it to the side, revealing a square hole at knee height. He squatted down and peered through it. There appeared to be a sewer on the other side, with the sounds of water meandering between weathered brick walls. Concrete-slab walkways lined either side of the water, but the opening was in the middle of a bend. To the right, the sewer extended into darkness, while to the left, he saw a flickering light in the distance. A fire from either a bonfire or a barrel.

Gotta be people ahead.

As he glanced down the empty corridor one last time, Keung thought he heard distant echoes of voices drawing closer. Swallowing his disquiet, he slipped through the opening and dragged the tin sheet back behind him, eager to escape the eerie confines of the tunnel.

Moving forward, the echo of Keung's footsteps filled the sewer. His visor-light gleamed off the green water that lapped against the mossy walkway. The light ahead drew closer, revealing itself to be a lit barrel.

Keung discovered it was the centre of a small slum encampment of faded tents lined up on either side of the waterway. A few people huddled around the fire, their hands outstretched, clad in layers of ragged garments. Others squatted against the wall on the opposite side, gnawing on blackened sewer rodents, while the rest stared listlessly at the murky water. The dim light of scattered barrels provided the only illumination in the encampment. It seemed the people here had adapted to a life of perpetual darkness, hunting and gathering within the vast expanse of the Gujin sewer systems.

As the lone Kingmaker walked through the sewer slum, he passed the entrance of a partially closed tent, his visor light reflected against a pair of motionless, pale legs sticking out. The sickly, cloying odour in the air suggested it was a corpse.

I wonder if they still float their deceased down into the Memorial Pipes, or if the decaying stench now lures sewer rodents... fattening them before everyone here descends to feast.

Keung pitied their dismal existence. They barely reacted to his presence, either too consumed by their daily struggle for survival or so disconnected from the world above they no longer understood the significance of a Kingmaker.

A hushed silence permeated the area, broken only by the gentle flow of water, the crackles of the lit barrel, and the subtle shifts of heads as some watched Keung pass. He forced himself to take deep, calming breaths through his mouth, and ventured on, eager to leave the sewer slum behind him.

Three scratched Yue characters were scribbled over a rectangular sign at the top of the door.

I bet that says Upper Gujin.

Taking a running leap, he jumped across the water to reach it.

Yes, I'm finally getting somewhere!

He twisted the knob, which spun freely, but the door refused to budge, indicating that either it was jammed or something was blocking it from the other side. Undeterred, Keung kicked at the door, focusing his force near the knob. It only took a few powerful blows for it to fly open.

It contained a long-abandoned maintenance room. Inside, dust and grime coated the numerous valve wheels and broken consoles and machinery that had once controlled the sewer system outside. Rows of rusty lockers and tarnished sewer pipes lined the walls, accompanied by an array of cryptic buttons and levers that had long since lost their labels.

The room was a graveyard of dated technology – handheld gauges, hard hats and outdated holopads lay strewn across workbenches and atop disused consoles. Littered all over the floor were various measuring devices and tools, some dating back at least half a century to Emperor Guangxu's era, from before the rebellions. Keung remembered studying some of these devices in his academy's engineering classes. They'd remained the same for centuries until Emperor Puyin introduced the Zhaisheng, which was currently propelling scientific innovation.

Keung navigated the labyrinth of interconnected rooms, each filled with neglected equipment. As he opened door after door, one in particular caught

his eye; it was already ajar, and he could feel a draft escaping through the gap. Pushing it open, a cloud of dust caused him to cough as the light from his visor cut through the murky haze.

Inside the cramped space was a rusted-orange ladder that looked promising. He tested its structural integrity with a firm shake, relieved to find it sturdier than it appeared. Gritting his teeth, Keung climbed the ladder, hearing the bustle of heavy foot traffic above. At its top, he attempted to push the circular manhole cover open.

His first try was unsuccessful as it was immediately shoved back down. He tried again, this time managing to just lift it before downward pressure from above slammed it shut.

I can't believe this.

With a deep breath, he shoved the lid open and heaved himself onto the street.

Startled pedestrians stopped to stare at him. Nonplussed, Keung wrestled the manhole cover back into place, switched his cap's visor light off, and took in his surroundings. *No idea where this is. I'll check my map.*

He raised his wrist and activated his holocommunicator. Because the map was the last application he opened, it was the first thing that popped up. He scanned the digital interface and saw that he was on the 60th floor of Upper Gujin, a sprawling complex that mirrored Lower Gujin Bazaar in scale.

The map displayed foot traffic glowing red near the highway exit at the south end of the complex, which indicated a high volume of people likely heading to the Gujin Bazaar to see Jian's crucifix. However, Keung knew he was the only one who knew what was really hanging down there.

Switching his holocommunicator off, he looked up and turned in a circle to observe his surroundings. He stood in a pedestrian mega-highway, rather than an ordinary arcade street or avenue. The massive thoroughfare carved its way through the heart of the groundscraper, with bridges and pathways stretching out in all directions like the tendrils of a spider's web.

A dizzying array of footbridges crisscrossed the air above in tiered layers, their sides adorned with LED screens with pixelated, flashing graphics and Yue characters scrolling past. Keung was still acclimating to the towering

verticality of these megalithic structures outside District Yu, a place that knew nothing of such anxiety-inducing heights, despite its wealth and opulence.

The oncoming stampede of pedestrians parted around Keung, no doubt recognising his distinctive Kingmaker attire. *I'm glad this place isn't as chaotic as the Bazaar. The extra space will make it easier to find the body... but where the hell is it?*

The thought of questioning random pedestrians crossed Keung's mind, then he frowned and sniffed hard.

That smell... Shit, is that what I think it is?

Keung attempted to follow the scent of burning, adjusting his course when it grew fainter. Open fires were federally illegal, this rare smell was distinct. Soon, he noticed wisps of smoke, as well as the growing reactions of civilians around him. He navigated down the winding highway, seeing the walkway becoming narrower as it led him to a more rundown and urbanised part of the Gujin complex, where traffic was sparse, and the structures displayed more exposed brick and weathered graffiti than plastered walls. Here the smoke grew denser as he tracked it to a small, dark alley off to the side.

Tucked between two residential apartment blocks, the alley echoed with the post-work cycle rhythm of life emanating from open, iron-grilled windows. The sounds of running water in sinks, stews bubbling on stoves, and entertainment consoles streaming shows filled the air. Through some windows, curious onlookers peered between the bars, watching the source of the smoke below. Sewer rodents darted across his path, and Keung caught sight of a dusk-cat rummaging through a large garbage bin. Then he stopped in his tracks. At the alley's dead end were three Kingmakers in dark trench coats and officer caps, their backs turned to him as they watched over an illegal cremation pyre.

Squaring his shoulders, Keung stepped forward. He wanted to tell them of his intentions, join in cremating Jian and shield them from any subsequent repercussions.

But the moment he stepped into the alley, all three men swivelled their heads around, a testament to their keen Kingmaker-trained senses.

Keung halted a few metres away and tried to recognise their faces, wishing to address them by name. Two of the Kingmakers were fresh-faced, not much older than Keung himself, but the one in the middle was greyer, perhaps closer to his father's age. Keung didn't know any of their names. Then, the older Kingmaker's face morphed from disbelief to unfiltered rage.

'That's Denzhen's spawn!' he spat. The younger Kingmaker on the right reflected the same fury, but the one on the left remained dumbfounded.

'Please, listen to me!' Keung exclaimed from the other end of the alley. 'I understand if you're angry with me —'

'You murdered our general!' the one on the right bellowed.

Keung raised his hands in a placatory gesture. 'No, wait! Please hear me out!'

Without warning, two of the Kingmakers bolted towards him, the third failing to grab and stop them. Keung's eyes widened, his thoughts lagging behind reality. One Kingmaker shot low, slamming a shoulder into Keung's waist, with arms clamping around both legs: a double leg takedown. Keung reacted on instinct. His hands locked around the attacker's waist, feet kicking back in a sprawl. He leaned forward and downward, forcing his weight over the attacker, stalling the takedown. But the second Kingmaker was right behind, fists coming his way. With both arms busy, Keung took the strike to his jaw, his consciousness flickering as the first Kingmaker lifted and slammed him to the ground.

Unable to rise in time, Keung became the focus of their fury. All he could do was curl into a ball to protect his head against their ground-and-pound, pain lancing through him with every stomp and blow. The only sounds he heard were the receding grunts and shouts of his attackers.

'Silver-spooned fuck!'

'Think you're a good person?!'

'… never should've come here!'

Cracking an eye open, Keung's blurry gaze met the two enraged faces above. The third Kingmaker was attempting to pry his compatriots away, but to no avail. Their rage deafened them to reason.

An agonising sting pierced his lungs and Keung gasped for air, his breaths

shallow. Not even a shout escaped Keung's lips. His hold on consciousness slipped further, edging him closer to darkness.

I'm going to die... They're going to kill me! Ba! Help me!

Just as Keung felt he was about to pass out, the pain subsided, replaced by adrenaline flooding his system. He felt a sense of calm wash through him, and whirring engaged somewhere near his kidneys. His adrenal pumps were activating, along with something that shouldn't have switched on; his Eye came to life, its blue glow unnoticed by the two Kings pummelling him.

The left eye implant moved without conscious thought, analysing the assailants through the gap between Keung's cradling arms. Just as he received one last kick to his head, his hand shot out, unholstered his hand cannon, and fired a single shot in a lightning-fast motion.

The gunshot flashed through the alley, silencing the chaos, but jolting Keung back to reality. To his horror, the younger of his two attacker lay on the ground, a bullet hole in the centre of his forehead.

'Truong!? Truong?!' The two other Kingmakers dove down to check their comrade.

Keung staggered to his feet, heaving for breath, the smoking gun still tight in his grasp. He retreated until his back was against the wall, his heart pounding as he fumbled his hand cannon back into its holders. He focused on the limp Kingmaker on the floor.

What just happened? Why is he on the floor?

Then it dawned on him. He'd killed a fellow Kingmaker.

All the while, his Eye faded from icy blue to its usual dark brown.

One of the Kingmakers cradled his fallen comrade. 'I CAN'T FEEL HIM BREATHING!'

'PUMP HIS CHEST! FUCK, FUCK, FUCK!!'

The desperation in their voices tore at Keung's heart.

What... what have I done?!

4

King in the East

Dr Chinh's fingers flew across the touchscreen, cold sweat beading on his forehead as he tried to reach his colleague, the troubled Dr Jode.

He typed a message to warn her of the sinister figures who were hunting him, and possibly her as well. As he composed it, heavy, deliberate footsteps filled the lab, echoing from the dark, deserted university halls. Dr Chinh's pulse quickened, his breath shallow and rapid as they came ever closer.

Just one more character; I have to warn her. He was about to hit "Send" when a deafening boom shattered the silence in the lab, a heavy-duty round penetrating the reinforced glass wall behind and screaming past his ear. The computer screen exploded in a shower of sparks, and Dr Chinh's eardrum ruptured from the shockwave. He stumbled forward as he clutched his ringing ear, feeling blood streaming out of it. He looked back and saw a shadowy silhouette standing outside the room, kicking at the lower corners of the shattered glass panel.

No, no, no, no...

The glass hit the floor in a single piece before shattering into fragments that scattered across the cold tiles, skittering away as the figure stepped into the lab.

Dr Chinh grabbed the hard drive on the tabletop and hobbled into the storage closet, knowing his pursuers wouldn't show him any mercy.

Broomsticks and cleaning agents loomed behind him; the elderly scientist tried to stifle his quivering mouth shut with his hands, but it was too late. Through the slats on the door, he watched the shadowy figure first check the destroyed computer, then approach the closet, clearly drawn to the unmistakable sound of his panicked breathing-turned-sobs.

Seconds later, the door creaked open to reveal the monstrous intruder standing in the dim light. He grabbed Dr Chinh and hurled him to the ground with a sickening thud, the hard drive slipping from his grasp and sliding across the floor. With a sinister grin, the large man retrieved it, turned it over in his hands, and shot a hole clean through it.

'P-Please… d-don't hurt me,' Dr Chinh begged. 'Everything I had was in that drive… I promise I'll tell you who I contacted!'

The man towered over him, his icy gaze sending pins and needles to the doctor's skin. Then he withdrew a wickedly sharp knife and tested its edge on his thumb. All the while, Dr Chinh sobbed and pleaded, babbling out names. But it wouldn't save him from the gruesome fate ahead.

****

'Are you sure? In Ho Man Ting? Han, you better not be joking like last time,' Jin said with a hint of scepticism through Han's earpiece.

'Brother, I'm dead serious. Some street kids told me they'd seen Yang members lurking around the square for the past three sleep-cycles. Installing speakers in the shadows. The kids think they're setting up for some sort of gathering.'

'A gathering? I hope it's not another bombing.'

'Unlikely. Ho Man Ting is the cultural capital of the south. They've got too many supporters down there. I wouldn't be surprised if half the southern royals are in bed with the Yang.'

'You're right, I don't think they're planning another attack. So, what could it be?' Jin mused aloud.

'I hope we find out before it's too late…' Han wiped his sweaty forehead and took a deep breath. 'And even those scientists returning from Chuan Wan Dam… everything here pointed to more Yang.'

'We should inform Ying. She'll know what to do,' Jin suggested. *'Where are*

you right now? Did you watch the live broadcast of that scum Jian's crucifixion?'

'Yeah, I saw it. Good riddance, those Kingmakers finally did something,' Han said in a flat voice. 'I'm in Kam Shan right now but I'll head back to base and see if we can get a few of our Tai Li on the ground in Ho Man Ting. In the meantime, contact Ying and fill her in on this new intel.'

'Sounds like a plan. May the Light save us all, brother,' Jin said in a subdued voice as he disconnected the call.

Taking a final drag from his tabac-stick, Han flicked the glowing stub into a puddle on the cracked, dark floor. His hands dove into the pockets of his office trousers, looking for a square of mint.

RS8 pocket cannon, melee multi-tool, my disguise kit... and no mint. Oh, whatever, Han thought with a sigh. Shrugging off his concerns, he looked around and surveyed his surroundings.

He stood on a busy avenue on the 88th floor of a groundscraper in Kam Shan, the largest district in the far Western Reaches of Kowloon. With the work-cycle in full swing, the streets buzzed with activity. Han pulled out his handheld computer, a sophisticated portable device that allowed him to communicate, access the Kowlooni network and even play some games when the mood struck. This time, he wanted to double-check the route back to the Luens in District Yau.

The path was straightforward. A few streets ahead lay the Yangtze mega-highway, where he could cut through Hao Ma's diner to the Ku-Ping Gai highway. From there, the journey on foot would take many hours, but a large PC-Carriage exchange on Ku-Ping Gai could speed things up. That route would lead him into District Yau, straight to Ji Sia City, home of the Luen family leadership.

With his route in mind, Han set off, pressing the play button on the music application on his handheld device. His earpiece flooded his head with the pulsating beats of Ji Sia Rap, a unique music style born from his district – one of Han's many guilty pleasures. As Yau's top special operative and law enforcer, he knew he shouldn't indulge in such violent music, especially those tracks from the deadliest criminal organisations in Yau. The current song was produced by The Roaring Fifth triads, an elusive and powerful

criminal family operating out of Yau's bustling capital, Ji Sia.

Han subconsciously mouthed the lyrics as the rapper DaoTaoFengi boasted about slaying a member of the rival Yuan Nanhai crime family. The music drew him in, despite the knowledge that he was listening to the gritty realities of Ji Sia City's underworld, perhaps a reflection of the failures of Yau law enforcement.

"Leupa hau Ji Sia do, Nanhai pak zokkong,
Cuo Qiangdao wan do gok, zon ta gunguo ja go zo-ing!
Do guongwan, jau zip, ketai muo fong zoyeng,
Tai kwan go zi ci, fer jin mou, Nanhai hoi zooeng!"
[Caught him lacking in Ji Sia, Nanhai boy hit a wall,
5th Bandits round the block, turned his shit talk to a backup call!
Swords splash and we dash, his bros ain't quick at all,
When they hit the corner, Nanhai boy's breath was gone!]

The aggressive lyrics painted a vivid picture of DaoTaoFengi and his fellow 5th Bandits confronting a member of the Yuan Nanhai on the streets of Ji Sia. Han couldn't help but bop his head to the rhythm of the gritty storytelling – listening to how the 5th Bandits chased their gang rival down, stabbing him in a frenzy while the doomed Nanhai's backup was still on the phone.

Despite the grim nature of the tale, the accent struck a familiar chord, a sound from his home city. Out here, in the Western Reaches of Kowloon, he felt worlds away from the core districts, both culturally and linguistically. The local Yue accents – the standard language of Kowloon – sounded strikingly different and unfamiliar to his ears. After an hour and a half of navigating the bustling Yangtze mega-highway, with its dazzling display of lights and lanterns, and bombarded with countless advertisements along the way, Han finally arrived at Hao Ma's diner. He was mere meters away from the district border, where Kam Shan met District Tei Lung.

The diner was wedged between a hair saloon on one side and a narrow, sneaky entrance to a sex shop on the other. Han approached the sliding doors, noticing a beggar slouching to his right, and a line of prostitutes marketing their bodies on the left. The grimy automatic doors swished

open, and the world of the busy diner, with its hushed underhanded deals, deadly gossip and lovers seeking a secret rendezvous welcomed him.

Dressed in plain office clothes, Han went unnoticed as he walked past the L-shaped bar. The patrons, seated in high swivel chairs, drowned their sorrows with cans of Shyou-Shuya mixed with whatever drugs they'd bought from the alleys opposite.

Han approached the staff area, where the dark and almost rave-like ambience of the diner, with its fast-paced electronic music in the background, transformed into the bustle of a busy kitchen. His shoes tapped on the dirty, greenish-grey square tiles, while overworked chefs, waiter boys and cleaners zigzagged through the kitchen. Pots and pans clattered and taps streamed with water as the diner worked through its peak hour. No one paid any mind to the tall, pale man with the chiselled cheeks and disciplined posture. Han had learned early on that as long as he looked like he belonged, a lot of private areas were accessible to him.

Pushing open the rear door with a creak, he emerged into the back alley that led to the colossal Ku-Ping Gai highway. This mega-structure, a suspended walkway on the 67th level, wound through the towering groundscrapers of Kam Shan, Tei Lung, Layo Nrok, and eventually his home, Yau. This route was as busy as it was ancient, but a convenient path to get to Central Kowloon. Just as the door slammed shut behind Han, his ringtone shrilled from his earpiece once more.

'Jin Kan is calling. Jin Kan is calling. Jin Kan is—'

Han tapped the side of his earpiece, and in came Jin's agitated, angry voice.

'I just got off the line with Ying. They fucking stole him!' he said in a rush.

'What? Slow down, brother,' Han urged. 'Who are you talking about?'

'Jian! The fucking Kingmaker dicksuckers took his body. There's a King in critical condition at the scene, and apparently, General Denzhen's own cumstain is involved, too.'

'You're joking?! A Kingmaker in critical condition? *Critical* critical? If a Kingmaker dies, we're going to be in a world of shit… One hasn't died on duty since—'

'Since the bloody District Rebellions, I know, 25 annui-cycles ago,' Jin groaned.

'Have you heard anything else from Ying? Were any other Kingmakers hurt?' Han asked once more.

'Why the hell do you care? It sounds like you're more worried about them than us! They stole our fucking trophy!' Jin snapped.

'What… Because they took Jian? Brother, a Kingmaker might die on Yau grounds, for crying out loud! I don't think you realise what this could mean for us. We can't afford to get in over our heads with them—'

'Ying Luen is calling,
Ying Luen is—'

Jin spoke over the robotic voice announcing another call from Han's end, *'The Kingmakers have trampled over us for far too long now; they sit idle while the Yang prance around our street—'*

'-calling, Ying Luen is calling—'

'Hold on, Jin, Ying's calling me. I'll ring you back,' Han said.

'Don't bother. Just do what she says and I'll see you back at base.'

'Light be with you, brother.' Han cut the line and answered Ying's call.

'Ying, talk to me.'

She sighed. *'From the sound of your voice, I think you've already heard what just happened here.'*

'What's really going on, Ying? The Emperor's nephew? A Kingmaker in critical condition? Jian's body taken?'

'It's a shitshow, Han. Lok and a few of our boys have left to check out the situation themselves, but the Kingmakers established a presence scary fast, and they're not letting anyone in. From what we've pieced together, it appears a few Jian loyalists among the Kings wanted to give him their own funeral – a cremation. Somehow, the Emperor's nephew got tangled in the mess, and the loyalists didn't take kindly to seeing the executioner of their beloved Jian,' Ying said in a clipped tone. *'Then a fight broke out.'*

'So, the injured Kingmaker?' Han asked.

'Lok reckons it was the Yaozhi who struck the blow... Kingmaker fighting Kingmaker... What times we live in, eh Han?'

'I'm still struggling to believe it…'

'I need you back at base. Jin told me you were on your way. And mentioned

about your recent trip down to Ho Man Ting.'

'What do you make of that, Ying? Speakers being set up in the shadows?' Han asked, seeking her counsel.

'It's probably nothing... but my gut says otherwise. Start planning with your team for reconnaissance around Ho Man Ting Square; see what's going on. Last time I ignored my intuition, it cost Yau tens of thousands of lives.'

Han's mouth twisted. He knew she was referring to the tragic Yau bombings last annui-cycle, a brutal suicide attack orchestrated by the Yang that had levelled five entire groundscrapers in the Nanxin precinct of Ji Sia.

'I understand. I'm a few hours from base. As soon as I'm back, I'll get the rest and start planning for the Square as you asked. See you soon.'

'Thank you, Han.' The line went dead.

Han continued his walk to the Ku-Ping Gai highway, merging in with the flow of foot-traffic.

Above the sea of bobbing heads, Han spotted a tall, white pole with the bright neon orange light of the 'PC-C' interchange. Standing for 'Public Carriage-Commute', the PC-C was the only mode of public transportation available to ordinary Kowloonis. While the Tai Li received generous funding from the Luen siblings, they weren't powerful enough to have their own exclusive transportation network like the Kingmakers. Han usually avoided the PC-C with its heavy crowds, stench of body odour and exhaust fumes, and sounds of people losing their last meal out the window. However, this time, his mission had brought him to the southern capital of Ho Man Ting City, and then up to the Kam Dong subdistrict of Kam Shan, the farthest district in the west. For discreet assignments like these, the PC-C was his only means of travel.

Han entered the worn-down interchange. Poverty and despair hung in the air as beggars reached out with pleading eyes and grasping hands. Packs of young hooligans milled around wearing hoodies, stylish sneakers and tight latex pants, sporting side bags across their chests which Han guessed would be filled with either illicit pills, knives, spray cans, or all three.

The law enforcement of District Tei Lung, known as the Lung Hai gangsters, strutted around the area in their patrols. They wore sleek, form-

fitting bodysuits made of reinforced fabric. Han watched a patrol pin a young woman against the wall and make an arrest. She looked to be in her late teens, with pink and green hair, faded face tattoos and pocked skin likely from drug abuse, snarling and swearing as the gangsters aggressively cuffed her with Xhiku links.

Han had heard the brutal reputation of the Lung Hai gangsters, recalling multiple charges of civilian violence against Lord Wai-Kit, lord of District Tei Lung. Despite the Lung Hais' menacing presence, the interchange buzzed with activity, echoing the frenetic pace of the western side of Kowloon.

Among the throngs of people, Han walked up to a wall lined with ticket dispensers and dropped five heavy coins into the machine. The machine lit up with its blue touchscreen, foggy and greasy from continual use and infrequent cleans. Han tapped on his destination: "Yau, Ji Sia Station 45," and a small paper ticket dispensed out of a slot. Just as he turned to face the tracks, a carriage rumbled to a stop. He braced himself as he prepared to step in, eager to leave the sprawl of the Western Reaches behind.

****

Back at the Yu Tower, the four captains found reprieve on the 16th floor of the towering Yu fortress after a long cycle of training centurions. Qi Juagong, captain of the fourth centurion cohort, sucked on his tabac-stick, the ember glowing in the small lounge room. His sharp eyes tracked Shen Li, captain of the third cohort, who was sharing a funny story about a troublesome centurion.

'So, did the whelp return after his tantrum?' Captain Aiguo, the stalwart head of the second cohort, asked. He leaned forward in his seat, his fingertips grazing the singular Yue character tattooed on his right cheekbone.

Shen chuckled. 'Not immediately. The poor lad was ashamed. Didn't show up for sparring for another 14-cycles.' He paused and raised a mug of tangy ora juice to his lips.

'That takes me back,' Captain Tien Ja, the elder commander of the revered first cohort, mused. 'I got my ass handed to me by a girl during my centurion days. It was more than a little embarrassing!' He ran a hand through his

short, pink-dyed hair, chuckling at the memory.

'When *you* were a centurion?' Shen guffawed. 'I remember that; I think I was swimming in my father's balls back then, Gramps!' The three captains laughed heartily, yet Tien didn't miss a beat.

'I know! You were such a pain in my balls that your mother and I worked all night to get you out!'

As soon as the joke clicked, Captain Shen's face fell dead. The other two erupted into laughter, while Captain Tien smirked with satisfaction at the burn.

Once the laughter started dying down, Captain Qi of the fourth cohort, a silent observer until now, leaned back in his seat and cleared his throat. The room fell silent, the other captains' attention turning towards him. Qi took one final drag from his tabac-stick, the ember quickly climbing to its soft filter, and flicked it toward the table, where it landed in the ashtray with a clink.

'Jian is dead. You've all heard the news, I presume,' Qi's voice was low, laden with a grimness that sucked the joviality out of the room like a vacuum. The other captains nodded.

'May his soul find peace amongst the Light,' Aiguo murmured.

The four captains sat in a moment of silence for the man they all remembered as their wise master and older brother. Jian had trained two of them personally.

In the midst of this, Captain Shen's voice broke through. 'What do we do now?'

'What we do…' A commanding yet youthful voice echoed through the room, causing the four captains to spin towards the entrance of the lounge.

'… is remember Jian the best way we can. Whether it be as a friend, or as a traitor.'

General Cao, a broad-shouldered figure of formidable authority, strode into the room, every step resonating with power and resolve. The captains stumbled to their feet and gave a reflexive bow of respect to the green, trench-coated general, who sported a single large pauldron on his left shoulder, its golden armour reaching his elbow.

'At ease, sirs,' General Cao instructed the four.

Straightening up, the captains turned their full attention to the young general.

'Jian's death is a monumental event, both a victory and a tremendous loss. General Denzhen is arranging a discreet memorial in his honour. It goes without saying Emperor Puyin and General Qin Shi would be less than pleased to hear about it.'

Captain Qi raised a questioning eyebrow. 'Who else will be present, sir? And where will this memorial take place?'

'The 16th level training dojo. Only a handful of brothers and sisters are attending, limited to his closest Kingmaker kin. I won't be present,' Cao admitted, a note of discomfort in his voice. 'I find it hard to reconcile the idea of honouring a traitor, but I respect Jian's influence here. His relationships in this tower were forged long before I was ever a Kingmaker. I'm only assisting General Denzhen to spread the word, nothing more. Be there at the dimming if that man meant anything to you.'

With a respectful nod to the captains, the young general marched out of the room. The captains exchanged glances, silent agreement passing between them. They wouldn't miss this memorial for anything.

'I must be on my way,' Captain Qi broke the silence, a hint of regret in his tone. 'My wife is expecting me. I'll see you all later on the 16th level.'

'I have a weapons class in an hour. Got to prepare, but I'll see you all too,' Captain Tien added, the weight of responsibility clear in his voice.

With firm handshakes, the two captains departed, leaving Aiguo and Shen alone in the hushed room.

'Off somewhere too, Shen?' Aiguo asked.

'I've got a few centurions to tutor. But I'll see you for the memorial.'

****

Centurion Baoyan stood atop the ladder, his spray gun hissing as he painted the brick mural in the Yu Tower's lobby. The cool, metallic scent of the spray mingled with the hum of the tower. Every stroke brought the face he was painting closer to life: bold eyes, sharp features, and an unmistakable air of hope.

'I'm guessing it's your turn for this week's mural?' a voice called from below. Startled, Baoyan twisted around, nearly losing his balance. His breath caught in his mask, muffling his response as he yanked it off and let it hang from his neck. 'Captain!' he blurted.

Captain Shen stood at the foot of the ladder, arms crossed as he gazed up at the mural. Baoyan couldn't tell if the ageing master was impressed or just curious.

'Yessir!' he said in a rush. 'I put in my name some time ago, finally got selected!'

Captain Shen nodded as he stared at the unfinished mural. 'Who's that?'

'Ji Mingchi, sir. He's being crowned as the new Lord of District Pik soon.'

'Pik…' Shen's brow furrowed. 'That's one place in the East you don't hear much about. So, what happened to his father… Lord Gaochi, wasn't it?'

Baoyan took a deep breath. 'No one knows. He just died suddenly. But it's no secret the damage he's done to Pik, sir. Wasn't a popular Lord at all. His son is a welcome change. He's vowed to tackle the famine his father exacerbated.'

'Hmm,' Shen muttered, his arms still crossed as he studied the mural. 'Well, here's hoping you're right about Mingchi.'

Baoyan turned back to look at his work, feeling a surge of hope for his downtrodden district, despite the East being known as Kowloon's shithole. *There's hardly any beautiful art that represents Eastern culture...*

The sounds of casual laughter approached as three Kingmakers bantered and strolled up behind Captain Shen. 'We allowing dong'fa on our walls now, capt'?' one of them sneered as they walked past.

Baoyan froze, his fingers gripping the spray can tighter.

Captain Shen turned and watched the laughing trio walk away. He glanced back at Baoyan and raised his brows. Cheeks burning, the centurion's chin dropped to his chest.

'I'll deal with them,' Shen stated as he set off after them without waiting for a reply.

Left alone on the ladder, Baoyan swallowed a knot of frustration. The slur stung like a slap across his face. Dongfa'shu – the racist phrase that

likened Easterners to the large rodents plaguing their local districts.

He forced a hollow laugh. *At least they knew who Mingchi was.*

With a sigh, he tugged his mask back on and resumed spraying the final details of Mingchi's face. As the colours swirled and the figure solidified, he couldn't help but wonder whether this mural would change anything. And if it did, would anyone even care?

Maybe it doesn't matter. But I'll do it for my people back home, since no one else here will.

5

Zhaisheng

General Denzhen watched his older brother, Emperor Puyin, sitting on the elevated seat and gazing at the large hologram being cast from the round table. Its dim light bathed the many faces encircling it in surrealistic shades of blue – the grand chancellor and advisor, Lin Zexu, political representatives from distant districts, minor lords and ladies, and the four Dragons, two of whom were present virtually through hologram. These were the key players in Kowloon's power game, and currently, that game was kick-starting Puyin's Zhaisheng.

Out of the corner of his eye, Denzhen glanced at the five stoic Manchukuo guards who stood cloaked in shadows along the chamber walls. Distinguished former Kingmakers, the Manchukuo served as the royal protectors of Emperor Puyin and his family. They wore midnight blue armour, enhanced with an intricate weave of graphene for added durability, and held towering spears against their shoulders. They remained a silent yet imposing presence in the upper levels of Yu Tower, scattered between the royal palace and its political nerve centres.

'I wish to proceed to the next stage with building the algae farms,' Puyin said. 'What do you think, Zexu? Pairing these farms with my new energy generators could be what finally ignites my Zhaisheng in the Western Reaches. Emperor Hongwu's great renaissance, the Hongwu Zhaisheng 800 annui-cycles ago, will soon look like child's play in the history books.'

Chancellor Zexu stood stroking his long white beard, seemingly lost in thought.

Annoyance creased the Emperor's face. 'Surely, it does not take a scholar to recognise its greatness! What say you, Zexu?'

'Forgive my silence, your Highness. I was pondering the logistics of your most excellent plan. However, let there be no doubt about its unparalleled promises.'

Puyin's features softened and he nodded, leaning back on his throne.

General Denzhen exchanged a worried glance with General Han Xi, the other general physically present. Denzhen, ever the voice of caution, was the first to temper his brother's enthusiasm with pragmatic advice.

'We shouldn't get too ahead of ourselves, brother. A tandem launch of the farms and the energy generators may place financial pressure on our other projects in the region. We are accruing debts we won't be able to pay off within any of our lifetimes.'

Puyin gave a dismissive wave. 'Fear not, little brother. East Kowloon is the Zhaisheng's collateral. They have little to offer my renaissance except for a steady flow of taxes.'

'Which we've increased six times in the past four annui-cycles.'

'And I'll increase it six more if my Zhaisheng requires it! But don't worry, the rest will soon reap the benefits of my plan as well,' Puyin interjected.

At that moment, Denzhen understood he was pointing out a deliberate strategy rather than an oversight in the Emperor's plan. This was the essence of Kowlooni politics, where the game was played on a scale most could scarcely imagine, its consequences affecting unfathomable numbers of people. Sometimes, it was best to leave one's moral principles at the door before stepping into the meeting room.

Zexu floated his hand through the hologram and pulled up a 3D rendering of the new farms.

'Emperor, you suggested building the farms here in Tong Feng's warehouses,' Zexu tapped and enlarged several prompts floating above the simulated render of the factory. 'The inspection team have approved the construction parameters. Some areas will need to be torn down, but

otherwise, the conditions are ideal to move forward.'

General Denzhen pursed his lips and shook his head, signalling his continued disagreement with the proposed construction. He noticed the Emperor catch the gesture, a slight frown forming as he leaned his head against his palm, his gaze lingering on Denzhen.

'General Denzhen,' Chancellor Zexu began, glaring at him through the ice-like holograms, 'let me clarify something the Emperor may not have made clear to you.'

Here he goes again, Denzhen thought. *On both knees for my brother.*

'The Zhaisheng isn't an exclusionary project. In fact, it is a beacon of hope for the places you are concerned about, like the East. The Zhaisheng is projected to lift 70% of eastern regions out of their famine within a few annui-cycles. As one with eastern heritage, I am filled with gratitude. I know that many back home share my feelings.'

Denzhen resisted the urge to roll his eyes at the elder man. *He acts as if I haven't noticed he stopped caring about his home a long time ago.*

Zexu pressed a button on the holotable, and the image of the empty warehouse filled with state-of-the-art farming machinery. The hologram displayed large cylindrical machines that spun and whirred, simultaneously processing algae, mushrooms, and grain. Water coursed through aqueducts and gutters where it meandered around machinery and drained out of basins near the bottom. Raised metal catwalks arched and dipped over these waterways, simulating workers operating and maintaining the hefty machinery. Plants and small trees adorned the walls and hung from the ceiling, making the warehouse resemble more of a garden than an industrial farm. This vivid, captivating display offered a tantalising glimpse into the grandeur of the Emperor's visionary project.

Zexu continued, 'With the help of the quantum-energy generators, we can produce food in such quantities we might be able to build a whole new East with just grain and algae alone. Even some of the towns in the Huang Wildlands, who have endured generations of famine. They'll find relief never felt before.'

Still sceptical that the structures could live up to these monumental

achievements, Denzhen looked at his fellow Dragons to gauge their feelings. Across the holotable, General Han Xi sat with his arms crossed, his face turned away in disapproval. Cao's expression was unreadable through the static and waves of the hologram, while General Qin Shi, the eldest and most experienced of the four Dragons, nodded at Zexu's promises.

Perhaps there is something I'm not seeing if the wisest of us agrees with the Emperor's plans, Denzhen wondered, swallowing his concerns.

Puyin spoke up once more. 'Indeed, Zexu. That is the goal. Denzhen, I understand your concern for those who may struggle until the Zhaisheng transforms Kowloon. So, should we not endeavour to reach the light at the end of this dark tunnel as swiftly as possible? Why settle for a slower pace that prolongs this momentary suffering? The tandem construction of the farms and power storage stations will be beneficial. If you're so wary about this, Denzhen, why don't you head to Fengcheng, pay Tong a visit, and see these farms with your own eyes? Let her know I will approve construction in less than fifteen work-cycles. That Tong has a knack for easing tension.'

From the defiant tilt of the Emperor's chin, Denzhen knew he was utterly convinced of his Zhaisheng's success. It was as if he had already foreseen his golden age happen and returned to the past to convince everyone else of its greatness. For the time being, Denzhen allowed himself a cautious nod of agreement.

'Any further questions?' Emperor Puyin asked the room.

General Cao's flickering hologram raised its hand. 'My Emperor, I have been in District Taiku Xhing for about three menses-cycles now, and I have observed some troubling trends with the new hospital equipment you are bringing in. Sain Victus Hospital has seen waves of job losses, and right now many of the former doctors and nurses are considering moving to more impoverished hospitals in districts down south, where your Zhaisheng has yet to arrive.'

'The unemployed will need to reevaluate the skills they will offer to my post-Zhaisheng world,' Emperor Puyin countered.

'So I've heard. But that is not my concern, Your Highness. I am more worried that those who refuse to make the treacherous migration south will

take up the mantle of the Yang instead.'

The twenty-five attendees at the meeting collectively inhaled. Denzhen knew General Cao's observation about the Yang was accurate. It wasn't just happening in the north, but in many districts around Kowloon.

Again, Zexu stepped in. 'Your concerns are not without merit, General. But these projects will create new job opportunities in unexpected areas, and in many unforeseen ways. Emperor Hongwu's great Zhaisheng 800 annui-cycles ago may have put a few people out of work, but in the end, the population adapted and found new jobs elsewhere. Back then, his changes were seen as too daring and controversial. Now his efforts for the renewal of the sciences, arts, and literature are considered legendary, an era of unmatched prosperity. Right now, we are seeing a repeat of those mixed feelings that came before Hongwu's Zhaisheng officially started. We just need to be patient.'

As Zexu's encouraging words filled the room, the Emperor's face brightened once more. The generals exchanged uncertain glances, except for the elder General Qin Shi, who lifted his chin. The room fell silent, signalling a tentative consensus.

Grand Chancellor Zexu clasped his hands together with a sense of finality and spoke, 'Well then, Emperor Puyin, esteemed lords, ladies, and generals, it seems we are ready to embark on this new venture with the algae farm project and quantum stores. May we proceed, your Highness?' Zexu turned and bowed to the Emperor.

'You may. Well done, Zexu, truly.' The Emperor nodded in approval. 'Denzhen, as I said, go to Kam Shan's capital. Stay there for a few working-cycles if you need. Tong Feng and her triads have been waiting back for a word for far too long now. We stand on the threshold of a new era for Kowloon.'

With the meeting adjourned, the room gates whispered open, bathing its exiting members in light. Denzhen emerged, blinking against the sudden brightness, when he noticed Yutai sitting on one of the waiting couches outside. *There he is. I hope he's brought some more news on Keung.* As Denzhen walked over, Yutai shot to his feet and saluted. 'Sir!'

Denzhen waved him down, 'At ease, young man. Walk with me. Is everything okay? Word of Keung's incident only reached me as I entered the meeting. I've only heard a little – what's happened to him? Is he well?'

'Keung is in the infirmary, sir; from what Cheng told me, he suffered a concussion and some broken bones, but he's in one piece. Regrettably, we suffered a fatality, and two others have been grounded, awaiting questioning. All three were ours.'

As Yutai's words registered, Denzhen felt the world tilt on its axis. His steps faltered, and he came to an abrupt halt in the empty corridor.

A Kingmaker is dead.

Such a disaster hadn't befallen them in a quarter of a century, not since the District Rebellions all those annui-cycles ago. Their ranks were thin as it was since the conflict.

Breaking the silence, Denzhen found his voice again, albeit raspy with emotion. 'So, who took down and cremated Jian? Was it Keung after all?'

Yutai adjusted his trench coat as they both continued walking. 'It's hard to say, but I think all four were planning on doing it when they ran into each other and… well, got into a fight. That's what I heard, but I might be wrong.'

'You haven't spoken to Keung yet?'

'Uh, no sir. Not yet, but I was planning to after this. Tribune Cheng is with him right now.'

General Denzhen came to a stop in front of a lift. But before he pressed the button to call it, he turned to face the praefect.

'Listen, Yutai, the Emperor has requested I go visit the Lady of Kam Shan to tell her the Zhaisheng has arrived in the Western Reaches. But after what Keung did last night, there will be consequences I must deal with elsewhere, and I cannot risk frustrating the Emperor during this crucial moment in his plans.' General Denzhen placed a hand on Yutai's shoulder.

'Of course, sir. What is your order?'

'I need you to head to District Kam Shan as soon as you can, straight to Tong Feng's den in Fengcheng. Let her know the farm project is a go; she'll understand what that means. It won't hurt to bring along someone from

your team. Tong and her crew can be a bit rough, but you're more than capable of dealing with any surprises.'

'Sounds easy enough, sir.'

'There's one more thing.' The general cast a cursory glance around the room without moving his head, the very embodiment of caution.

'Tong needs help with something *vital*. I won't be sharing more details as I don't know the full story myself, but whatever it is, you need to see it through. Take whatever she says as my personal order. That's really why I'm asking you to do this in my stead.'

'What about my work on the Yang situation, sir?'

'On hold for now. You don't have to explain anything to your team; I'll handle the paperwork.'

The general continued in an even lower voice, and Yutai's frown deepened as he listened.

'This is a strictly unsanctioned assignment, Praefect. Whatever you end up reporting afterwards, upload it as a personal assignment. I did *not* give you this job. Do I make myself clear?'

With a cautious nod, Yutai snapped a brisk salute before making his way towards the changing rooms.

****

Cheng sat beside Keung in the infirmary, watching as the young lieutenant struggled against the tight bandages wrapped around his body.

'How're you feeling now, brother?' Cheng asked, his voice tempered by concern. Keung reclined on the medical bed, shifting beneath the thin hospital blanket.

'Still okay, just as I was five minutes ago, Cheng,' Keung snapped.

'Sorry. I'm just worried.'

A moment of silence passed.

'Did you know Truong?' Keung asked.

The name hung in the air, a poignant reminder of the death Keung had unwittingly caused.

'Yes, we crossed paths a few times.'

'He seemed like a good person. The only one of them who didn't try to

hurt me.'

Cheng shifted uncomfortably as he realised Keung was still feeling guilty. 'From what I gathered in our brief encounters, he seemed like a decent man.'

'Well, there you go,' Keung scoffed. 'I kill the first Kingmaker since the bloody Rebellions, and it turns out he was a fucking nice guy too!' He let out an exasperated sigh. 'What about the others?'

'Joshu and Gonjjuo. I know them too. All three were members of Captain Qi's fourth cohort.'

Keung nodded to himself in silent contemplation. 'Do you know what's going to happen to them? What type of crime would this even be seen as?'

Cheng looked away. 'You're a Yaozhi. What they did is *bun siu zoi.* Crime against the dynasty.'

'Then they're fucked,' Keung said, clenching the thin blanket in a fist. 'So it's execution?'

'It's not that simple; none of us in the tower want two more dead. We already lost one, and the tower hasn't even finished grieving its former Dragon. Whoever we send to calm the Luen siblings better do a good job, because honestly, Joshu and Gonjjuo's fate may hinge on it. Our relationship with District Yau has deteriorated since they suffered the bombings, and they may ask for a lot before letting this one go. But then there's making sure General Denzhen doesn't order exile for Joshu and Gonjjuo himself. It's *his son* they attacked, after all.'

Keung's eyes widened. 'Exile… that's as good as a death sentence. No one survives in No Man's Land without the Ditu's guide.'

'Your word will mean a lot. If you testify that it was all just a fistfight taken too far, maybe Truong will remain the only death.'

'Oh, how fortunate I am!' Keung snarked as he stared at the air conditioning vents and sensors that were mounted to the ceiling, monitoring his vitals.

Another moment of silence passed, during which Cheng stared at Keung, unsure what to say.

'Keung!' Out of nowhere, a familiar voice crashed into the room like a cannonball.

Cheng and Keung turned their heads towards the dividing curtain, through which Tao's head now bobbed. The deep mischievous laughter of an accomplice simmered from behind the curtain, the unmistakable sound of Ushi. Cheng stood up, extending a hand to Tao as he emerged, when suddenly Ushi jumped through to try and scare them.

'BAH!'

Cheng's eyelids didn't even move an atom.

'Didn't expect Ushi behind me, did you, Tribune Cheng?' Tao teased as Ushi, grinning, handed Keung a box of hot food. The two newcomers shook Cheng's hand in greeting. Their arrival was like a breath of fresh air, lifting the despair that had been brewing between him and Lieutenant Keung. As Cheng glanced at his wounded friend, he felt a surge of happiness on seeing Keung smile again for the first time since the incident. His comrades' visit and Ushi's box of dumplings brought warmth and comfort to the tense atmosphere.

'Of course we didn't know you were back there; you guys aren't the trained elite of Kowloon for nothing,' Keung said with a chuckle before cracking open the lid. 'Are these those overpriced Huet-style dumplings from Ji Sia?'

'We wouldn't cheap out on you, sir,' Tao said, placing a gentle hand on Keung's shoulder. He and Ushi settled down on chairs around Keung's bed.

Ushi, with his bulky body folded up in the tiny chair, leaned forward. 'So… word in the tower is you thrashed Truong with your bare hands and then wrestled Joshu and some other guy into submission.'

'You're a fool, Ushi,' Tao blurted. 'Clearly our sir was doing the right thing by giving Jian a proper funeral, but unbeknownst to Keung, our ranks had been infiltrated by three Yangs, and they wanted Jian's corpse all for themselves. The moles ran into Keung, and our Lieutenant beats the living shit out of them, killing one with his bare fists. How close am I sir, eh?' Tao winked, nudging Keung with his elbow.

Cheng glowered at their methods for uplifting Keung. 'Stop perpetuating false rumours and glorifying this tragedy. One of us is dead, for crying out loud, you two! There was no Yang mole, and there was no wrestling. Lieutenant Keung made a grave mistake, and we all have to come to terms

with it if we are to sort this mess out.'

Ushi and Tao exchanged glances. 'Sorry, sir,' Ushi said. 'We weren't thinking straight.'

Tao gave a brisk nod. 'Yeah, sorry.'

Unfortunately, Keung's brief smile also disappeared, and Cheng watched him retreat back into his former shell of despair and remorse.

Feeling a tinge of guilt, Cheng spoke up to break the silence. 'Sir, will you tell us what happened?'

'Well… it wasn't my greatest moment…'

'It'll all end up in a report, sir,' Cheng reasoned. 'We'd prefer to hear it from you instead.'

Keung sighed.

'Yesterday, hours after we returned to the tower, I received an anonymous call from someone I assumed was another King in the tower. The caller, whoever it was… sounded so bitter. I can't remember ever causing someone to feel this way.'

'What did they say?' Cheng cut him off. 'Give me a caller ID, sir. I can find out who it was and deal with them.'

'No, no, Cheng. They were right to be angry. Even if I had no choice but to kill Jian, I had options when it came to his body, and I decided to leave him with the people who hated him the most. My decisions weren't beyond reproach.'

'You talk as though obeying protocol is optional, sir,' Ushi said. 'The law states the body of a terrorist is property of whichever district they die in.' He scratched his chin. 'Your job was done after killing Jian. There was no need to go chasing after him.'

'Hey, Ushi. We always have options,' Tao countered. 'What our sir did was right. If saving Kowloon during a bloody war means I can't even get a proper damn funeral, then Kowloon can get fucked! I would have done the same as Lieutenant Keung a million times over.'

'And you'd have died a million times over, Tao!' Cheng snapped. 'Keung only survived because his adrenal pumps kicked in. Unless you're hiding a pair of them up your ass, don't ever think of putting yourself in a similar

situation. It was not well-thought-out, and there could have easily been more than a single death yesterday!'

The tension simmered down with Tao reluctantly acknowledging Cheng's perspective. 'I understand what you mean, sir.'

Keung's expression tightened into a wince, his gaze lifting to the ceiling. He had become a silent witness to his own actions being recounted by others.

'Do any of you remember Lieutenant Dong and Colonel Kai?' Cheng asked the room.

Tao and Ushi nodded. They were two famous Kingmakers. Everyone in the tower had heard of the names.

Cheng continued, 'They fought beside Jian in the Huang Wildlands during the civil war. Colonel Kai took a fatal bullet for Jian, while Lieutenant Dong sacrificed his entire battalion to ensure Jian's victory. Guess who their sons were?'

Realisation dawned on everyone's faces. Tao gasped, 'Gonjjuo and Joshu?!'

'*Truong* and Joshu, but close enough,' Cheng revealed. 'Gonjjuo is older; he served under Jian before his defection, long enough to develop a deep respect for him. Undying loyalty is a common trait of those who served under Jian. A loyalty transcending generations.'

'No wonder they wanted Keung's head,' Ushi murmured, head shaking in astonishment. 'Our lieutenant executed someone many idolised as a father…'

'Alright, great guys,' Keung broke the conversation. 'I get it, I'm a murderer now. Can we *please* change the topic? Where's Yutai and Shing?'

6

Lords and Ladies

Undaunted by the infamous siblings' piercing gaze, General Denzhen held his ground. His curly hair, slick with sweat, spoke of a tiresome journey. The lift for this part of the groundscraper only ascended to the 32nd floor; the Luen headquarters were six more strenuous levels above, accessible only via the stairs. Each step left Denzhen cursing the Luens under his breath.

The siblings stood on a short dais a step above the rest, commanding the central room of their headquarters. It also doubled as a games room, its air heavy with scented smoke and the rustle of playing cards. Classical central Kowlooni melodies crooned from small speakers littered around the room. Gangsters lounged, some casting sidelong glances at the general, while others ignored his presence, engrossed in their games or puffing away on their pipes.

The room was a marvel of classical design – vases standing tall, rich tapestries adorning the walls, and opulent curtains. Spotlights studded in the ceiling, illuminating the pastel orange walls and the off-white stone-tiled floor to create a mesmerising interplay of light and shadow.

Lok Luen's sardonic voice rang out. 'One of the legendary Dragons of Yu graces us humble Ji Sia with his presence; to what do we owe this pleasure, General Denzhen?' Lok Luen was the elder brother of Ying Luen and the Lord of District Yau. He and his sister famously co-owned the Ji Sia gang.

Lok represented District Yau at major meetings, was the spokesperson for interviews and speeches, and most importantly, his imposing stern figure could keep everyone in check. But behind the scenes, Ying Luen made all the important calls, her brother merely relaying her wisdoms through a male voice. For those who knew, Ying was the one to truly fear. And Denzhen knew that all too well.

'I am here to apologise on behalf of Truong, Gonjjuo, Joshu, and Keung,' General Denzhen stated, his voice a rumble of authority, yet his posture one of humility.

Ying acknowledged the names with a nod. She stood beside her brother, arms crossed, wearing a Kevlar vest over a skin-tight, long-sleeve compression shirt with white and grey camouflage print, black cargo pants and pristine white boots. Her hair was dyed a light green, its left side shaven and covered in laser-etched tattoos. 'It's *intriguing* your own son is entwined in this debacle. Hasn't made it easy for us to blindly demand justice.'

Her voice was measured and composed, bearing the quiet authority of District Yau's true power behind the doors. But Denzhen had to make sure that fact wouldn't lead him to underestimating Lok, either.

Like his sister, Lok also wore a Kevlar over skin-tight, compression undergarments, the toned muscles of his arms showing years of gym training. He wore white pants instead of grey, with the same camouflage pattern. His long, voluminous, dreadlocked hair dropped to his ankles behind him, a few bundles of dreads dyed in vibrant colours. They both wore their vests with pride – the Luen Kevlar, a gift from the Yaozhi Dynasty to the Luen family upon their ascension to lordship many generations ago.

'What the hell happened, General? Jian was owed to us!' Lok exclaimed, his gaze drilling into Denzhen. 'Jian died in *our* country, thanks to intel given by *our* men. Do laws and customs mean nothing to you Kingmakers?'

The room grew silent as all those present listened to Lok's frustrated speech.

'Of course not, Lok,' Denzhen murmured, his head down.

'When South Kowloon rose up against the Yaozhi Dynasty twenty-five annui-cycles ago, General, District Yau was among the first to answer the

Kingmakers' call to war. Our father closed his eyes and allowed the late Emperor Guangxu to lead our district through massacre after massacre. We bled for you! Now, two decades after the rebellion's end, what has been our reward? When the Yangs were ravaging our capital city, what did your people do? You launched a bullshit operation that forever made us an enemy of the south! You ignored Ying's warning of an impending terror attack and when the bombings finally happened, the Kingmakers were nowhere to be seen! But finally, with Jian's fucking corpse, we had a chance to claim a victory over the Yangs. Instead, we faced the ultimate humiliation… at the hands of our closest ally no less! How does that make us look, General? Weak! This is an embarrassment, a humiliation!' Lok thundered. Finally, he closed his eyes and took a deep breath.

Ying placed her hand on her brother's arm in an obviously placatory gesture.

General Denzhen bowed his head deeper in acknowledgement, frowning in shame. He remained in that position for a full minute before lifting his gaze to meet theirs once more.

'I assure you, Lok, weakness is not a trait associated with the Ji Sia. Your loyalty to us and the Kingmakers has never been questioned, and your people are known throughout Kowloon for their unmatched resilience. Nevertheless, it's clear our efforts to maintain a fair relationship haven't been good enough.'

The general could almost hear the cogs of Lok's mind turning, sensing the collective anticipation of the room as the leader of the Ji Sia gang pursed his lips and whispered something to his sister. Denzhen continued, 'I didn't journey here to justify the misdeeds of those three men, nor my son for that fact, but to make amends. To bridge the divide their indiscretions have caused. If it clears up any misunderstanding, I assure you all four individuals were acting of their own volition and not on any Kingmaker order, official or otherwise.'

Ying nodded slowly, leaning in to whisper something back to her brother. A murmur rippled through the room, the weight of the general's words sinking in. Denzhen realised the assumption that the four had been acting

on Emperor Puyin's orders had been stronger than he'd thought, which explained the vitriol the siblings held towards the Kingmakers.

'Whatever the reality may be, we Kingmakers bear the burden of these men's actions. For their shortcomings, the Emperor extends his most sincere apologies. Allow me to personally apologise for the behaviour of my son as well. I recognise the tribulations you've been facing, especially after… the bombings of last annui-cycle. But I assure you this situation has cost us much more than you may think. My son's actions, and those of the three other Kingmakers, have created *challenges* within our ranks, consequences that demand secrecy. I feel it is only fair you are privy to the realities we have faced since that night.'

'Oh?' Ying asked, raising an eyebrow. While she appeared intrigued by what he was about to reveal, her brother Lok scrunched his face into a scowl.

'Challenges for the Kings?!' Lok exclaimed. 'Are you kidding me?! How exactly have you become victims of a situation your own people created?'

'What I'm about to share must remain *strictly* confidential, I can't stress that enough…' Denzhen began, glancing at the spectators lingering on the fringes of the room but unwilling to pressure the siblings to grant his request.

Ying's eyes narrowed and then she raised a hand. 'One second, General.' Scanning the room, she boomed in a commanding voice, 'Everyone out!'

Instantly, the classical central Kowlooni music ceased, the occupants rose, and the room emptied, leaving only the Luen siblings, the general, and the faint aroma of scented smoke behind.

'Apologies, General. We take secrets seriously. Please, proceed.'

Denzhen appreciated the sibling's thoughtfulness, his hard expression softening.

'Thank you, Ying. The unfortunate truth is that the altercation between the four turned fatal. One Kingmaker has since passed to the Light, just a few hours ago. We've attempted to hide this, but Light knows for how long it'll remain under wraps.'

This news changed everything. Lok sucked in an audible breath and started pacing back and forth, deep in thought. Ying's expression tightened. 'Was it your son, General?' she asked, concern in her voice.

'Fortunately, no. It was Truong, another of the Kingmakers involved. As you're aware, we've derived no gains from this incident. So, I plead for your understanding of our predicament, for the benefit of our districts.'

'This doesn't bode well for you Kingmakers,' Lok's voice echoed through the room as he continued pacing. 'There will be whispering in the streets if people find out a King has died. Rest assured, the Yangs will use this news to further undermine Kingmaker authority.'

'We are aware. The incident was highly regrettable and should never have happened,' Denzhen reiterated. 'The remaining culprits will face due justice. But we must tread with care to ensure no political disarray festers between our districts… or ourselves.'

Lok abruptly halted his pacing and turned to face the general, his frown deeper than before.

'*Justice?*' he spat, 'The Emperor has a track record of letting the Kings do whatever they want! Any "justice" afterwards is nothing more than a slap on the wrist.'

Ying, her hand resting on her hip, conveyed her agreement with a simple nod, her proud gaze riveted on her brother as he continued.

'And that's assuming whichever district you Kingmakers offended is important enough! I suppose we're lucky to be that important, huh General? To have the Kingmakers ask for forgiveness, let alone have a great Dragon here in person, makes us wonder how much is *really* at stake here. Not that it matters; no district in Kowloon has any real bargaining powers over the Kingmakers and the Emperor. Because everyone in Kowloon knows the moment we lords and ladies become too argumentative, we are replaced with a more… cooperative leadership, isn't that right, General? A *royal regicide.* That's how our family became the lords of Yau eight generations ago. So, who are we but usurpers of lords that stopped appeasing the Yaozhi's? When should *we* begin to worry about usurpers coming after us? Clearly, our options are limited; we can only hope a benevolent ear in Yu will listen to our grievances.'

'You are heard, Lok and Ying,' the general replied, his voice earnest. 'But we can offer nothing more than profound apologies. If you wish to know

how we intend to discipline the offenders, I assume it will involve detention and beatings, with a repeat of mandatory Kingmaker conditioning.'

'Does this extend to your son, Keung?' Lok probed.

General Denzhen forced himself to remain impassive as he responded, 'No, Lok. The surviving two members gave him a savage beating. I'm unaware of the extent of his injuries, but he is confined to bed rest, a sign the assault was far beyond our standard punishments. That alone is far more than what he deserved for his crime. It's clear Keung has suffered more than any official discipline would have dealt.'

While it was true General Denzhen felt no need to punish someone who had already paid their dues, he would never allow his son to be beaten by *anyone*, irrespective of the circumstances. He was merely lucky a convenient excuse had presented itself.

'I see,' Ying said after some silence. 'Then there isn't much else to discuss. I imagine the Yangs will go back to harassing us as soon as they recover from Jian's death, and we will just have to cope.'

'If it means anything,' Denzhen said as he locked eyes with Ying, 'Jian's death may serve as a reminder to the rest of Kowloon that the Yangs are not invincible, especially their leadership. I wager they will tread more carefully around District Yau, knowing how serious Jian's loss was.'

'We would also like to take part in this 'wager', General. But these are the lives of our brothers and sisters and we can't treat this threat with such flippancy. Perhaps it's easier to make gambles from the fortified heights of Kowloon's grandest tower, but we can't afford to drop our guard on mere presumptions. For now, we need to increase our street presence and ensure this embarrassing situation doesn't embolden the Yangs.'

'I am sorry, Ying. I don't mean to sound like I am making light of your predicament. The Yangs have been Kowloon's primary threat since the Yau Bombings, and we Kingmakers will not stop hunting them to extinction. Jian's hideout in Ji Sia City yielded a trove of good leads, which includes possible new information on the Ibilis. Their days are numbered.'

'Did you say *the* Ibilis?' Ying's eyes ignited with fresh resolve. 'Then we make one request,' she said, the rising tempo of her voice reflecting her

eagerness. 'Share intel with our special investigations team and permit them to come on board with the Kingmakers hunting the Yang. Let them help you help us.'

'I'm sorry. That's asking a great deal. Our operations have always been confidential to all outsiders. This approach has never failed us.'

'Except it has,' Lok countered. 'You've failed to rein in the ghosts of the rebellions, a war that was quelled over twenty-five annui-cycles ago! We are owed knowledge of this investigation as we bear the brunt of their actions. Don't be unreasonable, General. We aren't asking to be made Emperor. This is the most obvious solution for us both.'

The general's brows knitted together as he shook his head. 'You may as well ask to become Emperor! We cannot afford any vulnerabilities, and the Jia Sia are *the* largest gangster organisation in all of Kowloon, making it ripe for leaks. Maintaining Kowloon's balance means respecting our stable operations. Our desire for secrecy isn't mere caprice but a necessity for everyone's survival.'

Ying fired back with a hint of sass, 'Must I remind you how seriously we take secrets? Yes, our numbers are vast, but didn't we mention *only* our special investigative team would be involved? Not a single soul in the Ji Sia gang is privy to what happens within their operations except for the eight team members themselves, and I. Even Lok doesn't know the intricacies of our work.'

Lok nodded. 'She speaks the truth.'

'And what is this team called, Ying?'

'Surely you have heard of our Tai Li squad?'

The mention of the Tai Li brought the general's thoughts back to the chilling events that culminated in the devastating Yau Bombings last annui-cycle. The Yang had demonstrated a frightening capacity to coordinate cells across multiple districts, revealing that their network of collaborators extended throughout Kowloon. Their actions showed they were capable of executing complex, large-scale plans with chilling precision.

Yang militants had abducted the son of a prominent noble from District Yau, swiftly transferring him between cells until he was hidden away at a

secret location deep in South Kowloon. The elite Tai Li squad was close behind, relentlessly pursuing the kidnappers. However, by the time they successfully rescued the child, several densely populated precincts in Ji Sia City were left vulnerable, stripped of the protective surveillance normally provided by the Tai Li. It was then that the Ibilis publicly declared vengeance against the Luen siblings, and moments later, five major groundscrapers erupted in simultaneous suicide attacks. Tens of thousands were killed, and many more remain missing to this day. It was the first attack of its kind, an assault on Kowloon that was incomprehensible until it unfolded before everyone's eyes.

Despite the tragedy, everyone knew the truth; had the Tai Li been on duty in Ji Sia City as usual, the bombings would've never happened. Until this gross failure, many had dared to compare the Tai Li's new and rising accolades to established Kingmaker excellence. Now, their legacy was marred by the Yau Bombings and their subsequent disbandment.

But apparently not the latter, Denzhen mused. Although their competence was undeniable, skill and ability were not the reasons the general refused Ying's offer. The real concern was the possible leak of sensitive information, such as Kingmaker strategies, resources, and intelligence. But if the world still believed the Tai Li had disbanded, this risk might not be as worrisome.

'I thought you two abandoned that project. Why are they still active?'

Ying and Lok remained silent.

'Then perhaps it's best I don't know,' the general sighed. 'So be it. I'll contact the team investigating the Yangs and let them know they will be collaborating with the Tai Li. However, keep in mind this is not a cooperative group project; the investigation will remain on our terms, and the knowledge shared as well. Tell your Tai Li not to expect camaraderie. Any information they uncover must be disclosed to the Kings working alongside them. Are my conditions clear?' The general refused to compromise on this serious matter. He saw it as an advantageous relationship for both sides, rather than a pity deal.

The siblings gazed at each other, Ying giving her brother a subtle nod. Finally, Lok turned back to the general. 'It appears we're left with no other

choice.'

'If you accept the terms, along with the Emperor's apologies and my personal one, I will take my leave. Send your Tai Li to the tower at your earliest convenience, someone will see to them. Now, if you don't mind, I need to see my son.'

'Of course, general,' Lok said, while Ying nodded. They both bowed, after which General Denzhen made a dignified departure.

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The King rail hurtled through the dark tunnel, streaks of light from outside the windows occasionally illuminating Yutai and Shing as they sat perched on opposing seats, each lost in their own thoughts.

Yutai looked up at Shing. His short-cropped hair was combed forward, a small fringe sitting neatly across his forehead. He had his classic 'I am a gift to the world' expression on his face, his legs stretched out in front of him and arms behind his head.

'Do you know what project is being approved in Kam Shan, Shing?'

'Probably something to do with the only thing keeping Kam Shan from fading from into irrelevancy: their algae farms. Another Zhaisheng thing, I'd say.'

'The general did mention a farm… First the banks in the core, then the hospitals around the north, and now the vast farms of the west. Kowloon's getting a make-over. Makes you wonder what's next.'

'If the Emperor is smart, he'll ignore Keung and resume the cybernetic enhancement programme. He'll need stronger Kingmakers since it'll be a while till our numbers recover from the District Rebellions. Plus, we're probably gonna be short of another three Kingmakers. I'd love me an Eye and a pair of adrenal-pumps.'

Yutai recalled what Shing was referring to: the cybernetic enhancement programme from two annui-cycles ago, aimed at equipping top Kingmakers with advanced cybernetic implants. Keung, as a high-ranked lieutenant, was eligible but unwilling, but with his father's encouragement, opted for less invasive enhancements – adrenal pumps near his kidneys and a cybernetic Eye equipped with advanced information retrieval capabilities.

Yutai also participated, but his admission into the programme was late. He was fitted with sub-dermal lockpicks beneath his palms. Capable of unlocking powerful magnetic doors.

However, the programme ignited controversy among the tower's traditionalist factions, primarily due to religious objections. According to Dongism, cybernetic implants are only permitted for medical necessities and are strictly forbidden for anything else, *especially* as tools for combat. The situation escalated when another lieutenant Kingmaker participating in the programme suffered a wholly new affliction – machine psychosis – following a radical procedure that digitised his nervous system and connected it directly to software. Permanent brain damage forced the unfortunate King into early retirement, which led Keung to oppose the program. Denzhen complied with his son's unrelenting demands and barred all participants from undergoing further enhancements. Consequently, the infamous nephew of the Emperor became the reluctant face of the programme's opposition. Some commended him for it, yet many more hated him.

Yeah, It'd be great to have some cool implants, Yutai thought to himself. *Like shit from the movies. But I'm not complaining that it's stopped. It just hasn't been researched enough yet.* He kept his mouth shut and decided to change the topic.

'Know anything useful about Tong?'

Yutai's question was met with a lecherous smile from Shing. 'Tong used to be a real stunner back in the day. Supposed to be even prettier now. Shit, I wouldn't mind a night with her.'

Yutai scrunched his face in disgust. 'Isn't she pushing 100?'

'But my dear Yutai, that's the appeal. She's been pumped with ageing preservatives and looks like a young mum. But I hear part of the preservatives is… simulating the tightness of youth. Get what I mean? I'd fuck her silly. You wouldn't?'

'Cut that shit out, man. Something serious is going on between her and the general, and you're out here talking about waving your dick at her!'

'… You think General Denzhen hit it back in the day?'

'I do *not* want to imagine that at all.'

Shing chuckled. 'Relax, I wasn't being serious. Besides, I'm sure she has some daughters around we cou—'

'Oh my god, *please* shut up. Let's talk about where we're going. Have you ever been to Kam Shan? What's her gang called?'

'Never been, but I think Tong's boys are called the Kam Shan Black Jackets, or just Black Jackets for short. She heads several different gangs since Kam Shan is so massive. They all have a small slice of the Kam Shan pie, and she decides which gang gets which piece.'

'Sounds like she's playing Kingmaker in her own corner of the world,' Yutai remarked. 'Kam Shan is her little Kowloon; she decides who rules which area, just like our Emperor and the 66 vassal districts of Kowloon,' Yutai wondered out loud.

Shing shrugged. 'A cheap imitation at best. We protect Kowloon; they guard green goo until it's good to eat. And don't get me started on that shitty West Kowlooni accent.' Shing gave his own rendition of a thick western accent and twirled his hand. *'How do you do? O sire, how do you do?'*

Yutai laughed. Despite himself, Shing was a talented mimic.

'Well, a single woman running multiple districts has to mean something,' Yutai said. 'Kam Shan is the largest district in all of Kowloon, right? I've never heard of anyone having authority over separate gangs, each with their own turf in a single district.'

Suddenly, the monorail came to a grating halt, causing the duo to sway in their seats. They had arrived in Kam Shan's capital of Fengcheng, hours after dark.

'Let's get our maps out and head to Tong,' Yutai said as he stood up and led the way.

They stepped out of the carriage, and as the doors slid shut behind them, it immediately departed, likely summoned by another Kingmaker elsewhere. The pair left the docking port room through a discreet door, emerging onto a quiet arcade street. From the outside, the door appeared to be nothing more than a side entrance to a typical storefront. Perhaps only the shop's owner knew it concealed access to the King rail rather than a storeroom.

As Kowloon entered its sleeping hours, the bustling activity began to wind down; shops were closing for the night, and groups of people lingered on the sidewalks. Further down the street stood a large, open gateway that bridged into the neighbouring groundscraper. Both Kingmakers, their large rifles and automatic weapons slung over their backs, walked side by side under dimmed lanterns hanging over their heads. As they walked across the bridge, Shing typed in Tong's address on his holocommunicator and a red line appeared, weaving through the groundscraper and spiralling all the way down to the ground floor.

'Would you look at that,' Yutai commented, leaning over the map hovering above Shing's wrist. 'That's the damned ground floor. I don't think I've ever heard of a lord or lady having their headquarters in Old Kowloon,'

'For good reason. It's the ass-crack of Kowloon. If I don't pass out from the smell, it'll be the claustrophobia,' Shing groused.

'Yeah, not a fan either.'

As they walked, Yutai noticed some night stalls were still open, shopkeepers playing soft music to help them stay awake. The map had them take a left turn at an intersection and descend a flight of stairs until they were standing before an antique lift at the end of an empty alley.

The lift didn't even have automatic sliding doors. When the light above the door flashed green, Yutai turned a knob and swung the door open. Stepping inside, the cramped box swayed ever so slightly under their weight. After Shing closed the door, Yutai pressed the lowest button on the wall's worn catalogue of floors, a moth-eaten number zero. The lights flickered, and with a low hum the lift jolted into motion, its walls scraping against the shaft as it lowered down.

Lifts were as common as the groundscrapers themselves in Kowloon. However, many were ancient and hadn't seen upgrades for centuries. Yutai suspected the one they were in was no exception. Nevertheless, Puyin's Zhaisheng had started investing in upgraded lifts throughout Kowloon, addressing the alarmingly frequent deaths caused by cables snapping.

Yutai cleared his throat. 'So, Shing. Still planning on flirting with Tong?'

Shing side-eyed him. 'Oh, so now we want to talk about it?'

'I want to be prepared for any second-hand embarrassment, that's all,' Yutai let out a restrained smile as he clocked the level on the counter.

61, 60, 59...

'Well, I wasn't planning on holding back my charms. I'll see how it goes, maybe give her a gentleman's kiss on the hand, maybe ask what she's doing tomorrow night, who knows?' Shing twinkled.

'Well, isn't that just fantastic,' Yutai said distractedly.

Shing turned to Yutai wearing a frown. 'Wait, I feel you're not telling me something.'

'Yeah, I just remembered about Tong's eldest son…'

Shing raised his eyebrow ever so slightly.

'… What, you didn't know? The beast of Kam Shan, Shou Feng? Iridium-Fisted Terror?'

Shing laughed. 'Iridium fist, my ass. That's a myth, I know it.'

'Nope,' Yutai shot back. 'Shou Feng, oh that's him all right. It just dawned on me why Tong's name sounded so familiar. It's because she's the mother of the Iridium-Fisted Terror, Shou Feng. You know how the story goes, yeah? Lung Hai gangsters from Tei Lung show up on Kam Shan's border, refusing to leave. Tong sends her only son to deal with them, with nothing but a pistol as his weapon. He comes back with both hands smashed and broken, but not a single bullet left the chamber of his gun. Want to know why?'

'Well, obviously you want me to think he bashed every Lung Hai gangster's head in?' A bead of sweat ran down Shing's forehead.

'Yeah, but he went beyond shoving the Lung Hai's off Tong's land,' Yutai replied. 'After they ran back into their district, he chased them *into* District Tei Lung until he was just two hundred kilometres from the capital. Many Lung Hai gangsters lost their lives to nothing but brutal punches. Some say Tong had ordered him to cut his way into Tei Lung territory to send a message; others believe he just went into a mindless frenzy and didn't stop until he couldn't move his arms any longer. And that's how he broke almost every bone in his hands.'

'Wait… is that how Shou got his…' Shing stood there as if he knew the

answer to his question.

'Yep. Apparently, they fixed his hands by aligning all his shattered bones and then encasing them in pure iridium. I've heard he's known to kill people with a single blow if he doesn't pull his punches. That's how Shou Feng became the Iridium-Fisted Terror.'

Shing cracked his neck. 'Perhaps I'll flirt with Tong another day.'

10, 9, 8...

Yutai smiled. 'Who knows, from what you said, it sounds like she'll outlive her son. Maybe you can take your chances with her then.'

'Brother, I bloody hate you,' Shing sighed.

6, 5, 4...

Yutai held his smile as the lift neared the lower floors of Kowloon. It started to make screeching sounds, signalling its infrequent use down this deep.

'I know brother, I know. What would you do without me?'

Shing rolled his eyes.

3, 2, 1, 0...

'Looks like we're here, Shing. Let's get into character.'

Ding.

7

Aunt Tong Feng

The two Kings stood in front of a roller door in a short, dark alley, watching the two Kam Shan Black Jacket gangsters guarding it.

The craggy asphalt ground and weathered brick walls were damp and moulding. Yutai's lip curled as he noticed water leaking from an overhead pipe near the wall, a trail of moss wherever it dripped. *Why does Old Kowloon always smell like there's a garbage heap around every corner?*

Beside him, Shing pressed his fingers to his nose. His gaze lifted to the gaping void between the two flanking groundscrapers of the alley they stood in, where a web of tangled wires, makeshift clothing lines, discarded lanterns, and a myriad of litter wove a mesh of haphazard obstacles.

Yutai stepped forward and approached the two Kam Shan Black Jacket guards. Clad in intimidating black jackets, dark and wide-legged cargo pants, and white joggers, they certainly had class.

But no one can outclass a King, he thought.

'We're here on behalf of General Denzhen, seeking an audience with Lady Feng Tong,' Yutai announced.

The guard on the right cleared his throat, his voice a gravelly whisper in the dim light. 'The Aunt, yes, she's been expecting someone from District Yu for a while now. Please follow me.'

He turned and tapped on an intercom on the wall. Leaning in, he murmured a coded message, and the metallic gate cracked and groaned

as it rolled up, stopping at the top with a thump.

Gesturing, he led the pair into the darkness toward an ominous red glow. They reached a narrow stairwell curving up to the right, with a solitary black rail bolted to the left wall. The soft, rhythmic beat of West-Kow House music pulsed from above. At the top was the source of the crimson glow, a red neon sign spelling "Gehinnom" above an open door, the name of this establishment.

Walking through the door revealed an club-like scene with a dance floor, DJ booth, and bar; the scene had energy, but it was devoid of life, except for three Black Jacket gangsters talking at the bar. Flashing lights coloured the space, suggesting a lively night ahead. Near the dance floor, four stripper poles stood on a raised stage.

The guard guided them across the floor, up the DJ booth on stage and past large speakers playing music. Yutai felt the air pumping out of the speakers and quickly followed the guard as he pulled back a curtain at the rear of the stage to reveal another closed door. Walking through it, they found themselves in a dimly lit corridor, shuffling to fit side by side in the narrow space.

Yutai whispered to Shing, 'Tong is referred to as Aunt here. Show some respect, all right?'

'Absolutely not,' Shing shot back.

'What? Why?'

'I spent almost half that rail ride fantasising about undressing her, now you want me to call her my aunty?'

Yutai struggled to keep a straight face. 'It's a title, not literal, Shing! And no one's said she's *your* aunt.'

'I'm still not doing it,' Shing said through clenched teeth as they prepared to meet the infamous Aunt Tong.

As the door at the corridor's end swung open, Yutai, Shing, and their escort stepped into the beating heart of Tong Feng's domain. Her gangsters, the law enforcers of District Kam Shan, filled the expansive central room, each member decked out in variations of the signature black jackets. A grand spiral staircase that stretched to the higher levels dominated the central

space. Scattered doors saw Black Jackets walking in and out, while clusters of sofas and tables created cosy enclaves where groups of gangsters sat eating and talking.

Yutai peered into an open door and saw a busy firing range, the sharp pops of gunfire merging with the hearty laughter and animated conversations. Many Black Jackets stopped to gawk at the Kingmaker pair, but such reactions were normal for them, and they paid no attention.

Veering right through another door revealed a lengthy, descending staircase.

'Oi, Black Jacket,' Shing called out. 'How much longer till we meet Tong?'

'Just down these stairs, sir. Watch your step.'

Aunt Tong's den was buried even deeper than Kowloon's ground level. Yutai and Shing brushed against the yellow, peeling walls, down steep, uneven steps. The air thickened into an intoxicating mix of alcohol, dama, and shuiyan smoke, triggering a sudden yearning in Yutai to smoke shuiyan himself.

At the bottom was a closed door, which opened in response to their escort's double knock. Both Yutai and Shing found themselves in a room with a very low ceiling, almost hitting their caps as they entered. Their escort turned around and vanished through the same door.

The room was a testament to the march of time, the worn brown concrete flooring revealing centuries of use. Dated bulbs hung from the ceiling, and antiquated vents churned the heavy, damp air.

Yutai caught a quiet gag come from Shing, seeing him scrunch his nose. 'Cut that out!' he hissed. 'We're in the home of someone important!'

'How can any self-respecting lady ever *choose* to live in this… ancient dump…' Shing muttered under his breath.

Scattered near the sides of the den were more Black Jackets with coloured ribbons on their sleeves. Yutai realised the people in here were the source of the shuiyan and dama smoke, passing pipes to one another as they huffed and puffed, their attention now fixed on the Kingmakers.

At the far end of the room, a diminutive, yet regal lady dressed in a sumptuous blue and gold cheongsam sat at a long dining table stretched

sideways. Yutai studied her features. Shing wasn't at all wrong about her appearance. Her face barely revealed any signs of age, save for laugh lines and a solitary forehead crease. With her high cheekbones, hair swept back into an elegant bun, and those deep, dark eyes – was she really the century-old Tong people spoke of?

Looming behind her, a figure of imposing stature commanded the room's attention without uttering a word. His broad shoulders dwarfed his head, giving him a formidable presence. Bandages, wrapped around his fists and wrists, marked him as the legendary Iridium-Fisted Terror, Shou Feng. This behemoth, with his shaved head, watched over the table's proceedings. There two men of noble bearing sat opposite each other, their dark silk hanfu's complemented by richly embroidered satin trousers.

Shing and Yutai stood at the room's centre, garnering frowns from several of the Black Jackets present. It appeared they had intruded upon a significant luncheon, yet their arrival stirred no interruption in the ongoing conversations at the table. So, they waited with their hands clasped behind them, as Lady Tong Feng continued her meeting.

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'… You scheming rodents have got smarts; I'll give you that. Inflating your district's water bills four times higher, only to pocket the extra money. With all the recent dam issues, almost all your tracks were covered. You two must've had quite the run. But all good things come to an end, isn't that right, Lord Jud? Lord Datsi?'

Holding court from the heart of the expansive dining table, Lady Feng pivoted her imperious gaze towards the two men without moving her head. 'Did you really think anything happens in Kam Shan without me knowing?'

One of the men squeaked, 'Aunt, there has been a misunder—'

'**SILENCE!** How **DARE** you interrupt your Aunt!'

The lord flinched before dropping his gaze.

The youthful-looking, yet formidable Aunt of Kam Shan held her fierce expression for a moment before it dissolved into a cold smile and a head tilt. She languidly picked up a pair of chopsticks beside her plate of food and began eating, while the two men peeked at her from beneath their eyelashes.

As she savoured the final bite of rice and meat in her bowl, the Aunt looked at the two frozen men and her chewing stopped. 'Well, eat! I didn't cook you criminals a delicious meal only to watch it go cold!'

The two of them jumped in their chairs, snatched their respective chopsticks and began nibbling at tiny portions of the food on their plates, not once taking their eyes off their hostess.

Less than a minute later, the Aunt put down her own chopsticks and cleared her throat. 'Okay, that's enough. I have some questions, and I *hate* it when people eat while I'm talking to them.'

The two men, still chewing their food, placed their chopsticks down and swallowed the last morsels.

'I must say, Jud, Datsi… despite being the lord of two of my most significant sub-districts, I am aware one of you possesses a wit sharper than the other. You two rodents want some *cha?* Of course you do. KAANG! Bring us some cha!'

From the back of the room, a Black Jacket gangster scuttled out the door and upstairs.

'Now, while we wait for our beverages, you two have one last chance to show some honesty. Whose bright idea was it, *hmm?* To pilfer 12 million Hongs from under my nose?'

Lord Datsi thrust a trembling finger across the table at Lord Jud, whose eyes bugged with terror.

'Him! It-it was him!' Datsi cried out, his voice cracking. 'Jud approached me first! Said he knew of a way to amass a fortune without getting caught!'

'D-Datsi, you lie! A-Aunt, he— ' Lord Jud stumbled over his words, his eyes darting between the Aunt and Lord Datsi, colour leeching from his face.

'Oh, shut your bumbling mouth, Jud. He's just called you the smarter lord. Take it as a compliment!'

The sound of a door opening resonated through the room, and the Black Jacket gangster who'd left to fetch the tea reappeared with a beautiful ceramic teapot in hand. He walked around the table, past Lord Jud's chair, and placed it in front of the Aunt. For a moment, the blue and white teapot captivated

everyone's attention.

'Brilliant. It's cha time!' the Aunt announced with a flourish. 'Lord Jud, come forward and pour Datsi and yourself a steaming cup.'

But Lord Jud just sat there, still as a statue.

'Oh Light…' Aunt Tong's voice dipped. 'If I have to repeat myself again, I might feel compelled to—'

Jud sprang from his seat before she could detail any further threats. Aunt Tong gave one of her signature inscrutable smiles as he approached.

As Lord Jud reached for the teapot, Aunt Tong's hand fastened around his wrist with an unexpected gentleness, her long, red nails clacking together, drawing him in. What she whispered into his ear drained the little colour left on his face. She smiled and nodded, whispering away, as if exchanging trivial gossip, which caused the poor lord to shake even harder.

The Aunt finally let go of Lord Jud's wrist and drew back, straightening her posture. She cast a sidelong glance at Lord Datsi, still seated, whose eyes darted between her and Lord Jud like a cornered rodent.

'Dear Jud, why don't you share our little secret with Lord Datsi? I think he has every right to know, don't you? You two are partners in crime, after all.'

Still standing, Lord Jud's eyes glistened with tears as he spoke to Datsi in quivers. 'Th-The Aunt has g-given me a- a ch-ch-choice. There's a poison in the cha—'

'Oh, boo! You'll kill all three of us with boredom before anything else does!' Tong snarked. 'My dear Lord Datsi, this here is what's called an assassin's teapot. There are several chambers holding liquids, and depending on how Lord Jud tilts it when pouring, either delicious jade cha or a deadly poison will come out. Now, as Jud was the architect behind the tomfoolery that led you both here today, he has two options: redemption by suicide, or double down on his selfishness… and choose death for you instead. Of course, if he chooses the latter, he'll have to sleep at night knowing he doubly screwed you over. Though, considering how swiftly you pointed the finger at him, he might not feel *too* bad.'

Datsi's breathing turned erratic. All semblance of composure was

beginning to unravel.

'Come now, Lord Jud, go pour yourself and your friend some cha.' The steel in the Aunt's voice chilled the room.

Lord Jud's approach to the other end of the table resembled a death march. Their eyes locked, Datsi's in silent, desperate appeal.

Sweat dripped down Jud's forehead to his chin, plopping next to Datsi's plate of food. Datsi's eyes were fixed on the teapot's spout as his possible executioner hesitated. Then, with a decisive motion, Jud filled Datsi's cup with a greenish liquid. Wiping his forehead with the sleeves of his hanfu, he returned to his end of the table, filled his teacup and sat back down.

'After a cup of this lovely beverage, one of you will begin your journey to Sheoul, where the lakes of fire will forever remind you of the price of betraying your Aunt! Now, in the name of God, let us drink. May everyone else in this room live long, fulfilling lives!'

Both lords raised their teacups, but Datsi hesitated, watching Jud take the first sip. By the time Lord Jud's cup clinked back on his saucer, Datsi still hadn't tasted his tea, lowering it from his lips instead. Everyone listening now knew what Lord Jud had chosen for his former partner.

The Aunt scowled. 'That's hardly fair, darling. You've robbed us of a good show. You were meant to drink at the same time as Jud.'

But Datsi sat frozen, staring with horrified fascination at the liquid in his cup.

The Aunt's face contorted with anger. **'THAT IS THE LAST TIME YOU WILL CHEAT ME, DATSI. DRINK YOUR CHA OR SHOU WILL SHOVE ITS PORCELAIN SHARDS DOWN YOUR DAMN THROAT!'**

The Aunt, with her large almond-shaped eyes raging with the tempest of a storm, nodded to the hulking man behind her. At her signal, Shou Feng advanced like a sentry and stood arms crossed behind the cowering lord.

Aunt Tong's stern gaze bore into Datsi, offering one final opportunity for compliance, a last chance to meet his end on his own terms.

Inhaling sharply, Lord Datsi snatched up his cup and swallowed its contents in one abrupt motion. The scalding liquid trickled from the corners of his mouth as his Adam's apple rose and fell with each gulp. Moments

later, he jerked back in his seat, hacking and weaving. Then he clutched his throat, every vein and artery in his neck and temple bulging unnaturally. His face turned blood-red, eyes jutting out their socket with his silent struggle for air. He gurgled and gasped as tears streaked his cheeks, while the mucus pouring over his lips turned to thick rivers of blood. At last, he collapsed face-first in his meal.

The ensuing stunned silence didn't last long as the Aunt stood up from her seat and approached Lord Jud, who was looking down. Anywhere else but at the man he'd sentenced to death.

The Aunt sat at the corner of the table in front of him, her legs crossed over another, the same unnerving smile on her face. 'Is it fair to allow you to leave my den unscathed, your honours and titles untouched, while poor Datsi bore the brunt of your malice and deceit? What, then, shall be your recompense?'

With a look of utter defeat in his eyes, Lord Jud broke down pleading. 'Please, Aunt, I beg you for mercy, for forgiveness! I have learned my lesson, please, oh please—'

Amidst Lord Jud's pleas, the Aunt grabbed his jaw, her fingers pressing into his cheeks to force his mouth open. With her other hand, she reached in and grabbed his flapping tongue, pinching the tip and drawing it outwards.

'God gifted us these wonderful tongues so we can sing worship with our living breath. And yet, you…' Her index fingernail gently traced the bottom of his tongue. 'Perhaps this will teach you to make better use of it…'

Without warning, she pushed her sharp red nail into its underside, piercing it through to the top. Lord Jud shut his eyes and could only offer pitiful whines as she pulled her finger towards herself, tearing his tongue wider and wider… He moaned and squirmed, digging his nails into his thighs as his body shuddered.

'Datsi had to put up with a fair bit of pain too…' the Aunt said, with an expression of childlike curiosity on her face, 'so perhaps…' She twisted her finger like a screw, watching saliva, blood and fleshy fibres of tongue fill the under sides of her manicured, painted nail.

Finally, she retracted her nail and wiped it on the tablecloth, blood

streaking its whiteness. Lord Jud covered his mouth with his hands and rocked side to side in pain, wailing.

'Guards, escort *Lord* Jud outside. He has much to reflect on tonight. Perhaps *that'll* teach him something about loyalty. And return Datsi's body to his family; let them know all his titles and riches now belong to his wife. I knew Datsi well enough to know I've done her a favour.'

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As several Black Jackets shoved the disoriented Lord Jud out of the room, they carried Datsi's lifeless body with them, bits of rice and curry still sticking to his face. Yutai and Shing cast uneasy glances at one another, still waiting to be addressed.

The Aunt returned to her seat and whispered a jaunty tune, as if unaware there were two Kingmakers waiting. Then, as if she'd *just* noticed them, she jolted her head in surprise.

'Oh? Two Kingmakers come from the mighty Yu Tower? Well, pardon me! How do you do, distant travellers?' Tong's voice, despite its steely undertone, had a delicate feminine quality that bore no hint of her age.

Both Kingmakers bowed. 'Greetings, Aunt,' Yutai said with a voice crack, her recent display of cruelty still fresh in his mind. 'My name is Yutai; this is my—'

'Shing,' his colleague interjected. 'I mean, not *his* Shing, just Shing. At your service.'

Tong Feng appraised them both from head to foot. 'And how was the journey? Was it alright? I can't remember the last time I had a Kingmaker set foot down here!'

'The King rail made it quite brief,' Yutai said. 'The journey to Kam Shan is no longer the expedition it used to be. We're here at General Denzhen's request.'

As though she could barely hold in her excitement, the Lady cracked a wide smile.

'My name is Tong Feng, but you can call me Aunty Tong if you so desire. Makes me feel young. Even my great-grandchildren have taken to it! Anyway, what news does my Prince Denzhen bring?'

Prince Denzhen, Yutai thought. *Now that's something I haven't heard. Of course, the Aunt would have known the general since he and the emperor were just princes.*

Shing cleared his throat. 'Emperor Puyin has approved some project in Kam Shan…'

Yutai added, '… and we are to be at your service while your men prepare for construction.'

'That's wonderful news. Yutai, is it? And how is the Emperor, hmmm? Is he well?

'Emperor Puyin is in excellent health, Aunt Tong. If you don't mind me asking, how can we get a head start on this project? The general told us you needed some special help.'

'Slow down, young one! You must both be famished. Let's find you something to eat first.'

Yutai shook his palms. 'No thank you, Aunty. We had dinner before we came here. But Shing and I thank you for the offer.'

'Actually, I'm quite hungry, *Tong,*' Shing said, rubbing his belly over his trench coat.

Yutai closed his eyes in embarrassment and sighed. Shing still seemed adamant on not calling her aunt. *Should've left this fool back at the Tower.*

'Perfect! KAANG! Bring some of tonight's special from the mess in a to-go box. No, bring two. Young Yutai is feeling a little too polite tonight.' Tong winked at him. 'In the meantime, let's have a chat, gentlemen.'

A Black Jacket from one of the back sofas stood up and left the room to do Tong's bidding.

'So, tell me, have those secretive little schoolgirls told you much about what I'm building here?'

'Nothing at all,' Yutai confessed. 'But we've got our theories.'

'Marvellous! I'm quite partial to a well-crafted theory. Let's take a walk and discuss this further. Afterwards, I might require a small favour; no big deal for strong men such as yourselves.' She turned her head to the side, addressing her son behind her, 'Shou, stay here and watch over the club until I return. Make sure no one falls behind on patrol duty, or else there

will be hell to pay!' Shou's gaze remained fixed on the two Kingmakers, his narrowed eyes brimming with distrust, and nodded.

Tong rose gracefully to her feet, revealing more of her exquisite, light blue and gold silk cheongsam adorned with delicate white floral patterns, which accentuated her small waist and shapely hips. Yutai's eyes widened; he could hardly pry them away. He still couldn't believe she was about the same age as when his great grandmother passed away.

Instead of striding a few steps ahead, like their escort earlier, she came to a halt right between them.

'Well come on then! Give me your arms as support. Don't be shy! The streets of Kam Shan are dangerous after the lanterns have dimmed. Besides…' Her voice dropped to a whisper. 'There have been concerning reports of rodent attacks late at night, incidents doubling by the day. These aren't the ones you shoo away. No, they're different. Like the vermin that roam East Kowlooni sewers. Perhaps even larger, more aggressive. I would feel a lot safer with two dashing Kings by my side.'

Both Kings frowned and Yutai gingerly linked his arm with Tong's. She responded by drawing him closer. Shing followed suit awkwardly, his face scarlet as Tong's swift tug drew him to her side. Then she strutted out of the room like a catwalk model, bringing the Kings with her. As she led them up the stairs to the main floor, her heels clacking on the short steps, Yutai caught the scent of her sweet perfume.

'Now, what theories have you cooked up about our project? And be quick! I aim to have all rumours expelled and theories corrected before we reach the site.'

Much to Yutai's relief, Shing spoke first, 'W-We… uh… thought it may involve the food p-production here in Kam Shan. We've heard of the great algae and fungus processing machines you have.'

'Oh, have you? What about you, Yutai? Did you arrive at the same conclusion?'

'Y-yes, Aunty. I mean, Aunt.'

'My, aren't you two sharp!' You're on the right path. The Zhaisheng will primarily upgrade our farming industries, but it's not just that. There is

something else, something far more concerning. Have either of you heard of Chuan Wan Dam?'

The Kings exchanged a look before nodding in unison.

'It's the lifeblood of Kowloon, our only source of water,' Shing said. 'The dam is somewhere inside No Man's Land and flows out through Kam Shan.'

'Ding, correct! Because water flows into Kowloon from its western end, the Yaozhi family has historically entrusted Kam Shan with overseeing its processing and distribution. That's why we're the agricultural head of Kowloon. As you mentioned, the dam extends into No Man's Land, which makes it difficult to conduct regular checks. No Man's Paranoia is nothing to joke about, I tell you. Recently, we've had urgent cause to investigate the dam, because the water pressures for our farms have fallen far lower than normal.'

In the meantime, the three reached the roller gate of the main entrance, which began its slow ascent.

Tong continued speaking as they waited, 'So, I sent a team of experts deep into No Man's Land. Of course, they'd get nowhere without the Ditu, so one of your generals sent us a Kingmaker to act as their guide. Once they made it to the ancient dam, my team made a dire discovery. The dam's centuries-long isolation since the last check-up had allowed it to fall into severe disrepair. Barely any regulation sensors were functioning, their gears almost completely fused from corrosion. We were lucky to discover this issue before it was too late.'

As the roller door finally heaved up all the way, they stepped out into the dark alleyway, mirroring Tong's stride to avoid tripping her. The guards outside bowed to the Aunt as she strode past them with the briefest nod of acknowledgement.

'Too late? What do you mean?' Yutai asked.

'All the mechanisms I named prevent the mass of water behind the dam from inundating Kowloon,' Tong said ominously. 'Our researchers began calculating when the water might breach the dam. The situation took a turn for the worse as heated debates broke out among them. They couldn't reach a consensus about when the dam will fail. One group estimated we had

about 120 annui-cycles, while another believed it'd come crashing down in less than five. But do not mistake these conflicting conclusions as mere errors in their calculations! I can assure you No Man's Paranoia played a bigger role than what these researchers admit. Is this making sense to you two?' Both Kings nodded simultaneously. Yutai couldn't deny what he was hearing sounded incredibly troubling. Even Shing's expression was tightened to a frown.

'After my team returned from Chuan Wan, I had quite a bit on my hands. I dispatched ten researchers, and only eight returned. One of them has succumbed to irreversible No Man's Paranoia and has gone insane. Three others have vowed to never work for me again. And one has… lost his life recently.'

Yutai almost whistled at how shockingly dire the situation sounded.

'I requested aid from the Emperor, but he has been quite unhelpful. They've informed me the Kingmaker who accompanied my team collected enough data for them to work on fixing the dam themselves. Yet here I am, standing amidst unexplained disappearances and an unsolved murder, all the while I learn there's a ticking time bomb of a dam next to us. That's why I reached out to the Emperor's younger brother, who is a far more reasonable man.'

Navigating the tight alleys at ground level was a challenge. Their path snaked and twisted, rising and dipping with uneven stairs everywhere. Hazards lurked at every turn: jutting construction rods, low-hanging shop signs and tripwire-like pipes strewn across the walkway. As they passed a shopkeeper pulling down his shutters, his gaze lingered on the two Kings escorting Tong. The flickering neon sign above his shop dulled as he retreated into the backroom.

'Aunt,' Yutai ventured. 'What do you need from us both?'

Tong's eyes sparkled with mischief. 'Oh, you'll find out soon enough. Are either of you skilled in investigation? Ah, what a silly question, of course you are. I recall the notorious women-butcher of Kam Shan, who terrorised the streets of West Kowloon. No girl was safe. It's no wonder it took a Kingmaker to track him down and kill him. The legends that surround your

people… the very thought makes me feel alive.'

Yutai felt a tinge of frustration at Tong's roundabout way of saying a simple thing, while Shing used his free right arm to scratch the back of his head, almost tipping over his cap.

'And how does that relate to us?' Shing asked.

'The women-butcher was brought to justice long before either of us was born,' Yutai added. 'If you want us to go running around solving unfinished murder cases, we don't have the resources, time or even the specialised training needed.'

'Light… this small talk was a mistake,' the Aunt muttered under her breath. 'I just shared a thought that crossed my mind, which is a testament to my respect and admiration for you Kings. I had assumed all of you were as talented as *that* Kingmaker, but judging by your reaction…'

'Then what is the favour?' Yutai pressed.

'You'll see… oh, a left here, and we'll be at the algae farms.'

The trio veered off into a side alley, the first deviation from the winding and narrow main street. They paused at the entrance to a building, where a Black Jacket stood at attention with a large rifle in hand.

'Welcome, Aunt.' The guard greeted her with a deep bow.

'Has anyone disturbed the scene? I found two handsome Kings who volunteered to help.'

No, we didn't, Yutai quipped in his head.

The guard swung open the double doors, and they ascended the steps beyond. On the way up, Yutai noticed a trail of dried blood under his feet, leading to the first level. He glanced at Shing, who gave him a brisk nod. It led through an open door on the first floor, revealing the inside of an enormous, empty warehouse. Raw materials – metal beams, gears and enormous batteries – were scattered across the floor. The ceiling was at least six stories high. It was still early in the pre-construction phase for the farms. This would be the first site for the Emperor's Zhaisheng in the west, which would ignite his great renaissance.

Black Jacket gangsters were milling around the warehouse making calls, some shouting into their communicators and engrossed in pressing tasks,

while others huddled at the centre of the warehouse, gawking at something in the floor. Yutai made a sound in his throat and jerked his head to draw Shing's attention; the streaks of blood led to the small crowd of Black Jackets. Lights flashed intermittently from the crowd – some snapped photos, while others just stared. At what, Yutai couldn't yet see.

As they approached the commotion, Yutai felt Tong tighten her grip, as if she was now holding them out of a genuine need of protection. Whatever they were approaching was clearly unsettling her.

The Black Jackets bowed to Tong as they passed, but she acknowledged none of them, instead locking her gaze on the small crowd ahead.

'… murder…'

'… It was the Yang…'

'… Kingmakers are here now…'

Yutai heard these words float in the air, part of the myriad telephone conversations going on around them.

Upon reaching the crowd, the Black Jackets parted to grant passage to the trio. Tong released her hold on the Kingmakers as they came upon the gory spectacle where the dried trail of blood ended.

A violently mutilated body lay before them. Vicious stab wounds were spread across the neck, torso, arms, and legs. *More than twenty,* Yutai thought. *No, at least fifty; some of them overlap.*

Entrails spilled from the gut and even bones were exposed in part. The corpse was still clothed in a lab coat and plain black trousers, yet the bloodied garments were somehow in a better state than the body that wore it.

Yutai had to avert his eyes, as a wave of nausea swept over him. However, Shing stood resolute beside him, absorbing the grim scene sprawled across the floor. It looked as though a monster had had its sadistic fun with the corpse.

'That was Dr Chinh, found just a few hours ago, right here,' Tong spoke with regret and sadness. 'He was to be the lead engineer for the new farms, a champion for the Zhaisheng in Kam Shan. He was also the research lead at Chuan Wan Dam. We haven't even had the chance to notify his family yet.'

'Do you know who could have done this?' Shing asked. 'Yang wanting to piss all over the Zhaisheng?'

'That's what scares me, Shing. If it's the Yang, they are privy to sensitive information: the identities of my most important researchers and scientists, pioneers of the Emperor's Zhaisheng, and how to get to them. They would know of the great farms being built here. They may also be privy to the dam's neglected state, and that it *may* destroy us all within an unknown number of cycles. If they even dared make this public… with enough evidence—'

'They'll undo everything,' Yutai finished her sentence.

'You said *if* it's the Yang,' Shing added. 'Who else do you suspect?'

'Most of my team believe the supernatural is chasing them, haunted from their time in No Man's Land. I've had them all checked for No Man's Paranoia. Apart from one researcher, all their cases are mild, yet they're all convinced something is stalking them.'

Shing scoffed. 'Well, then obviously, that's not what's—'

The Aunt snapped instantly, 'Do not "obviously" me, King! If you believe Kowloon only deals in the obvious, even my stupidest Black Jacket is brighter than you!'

Shing's jaw twitched, but he remained silent.

Sensing the tension between the two, Yutai intervened.

'If it really is ghosts, this is out of our job description. But if it's Yang, even then, we're fighting them all across Kowloon as is. Since we conducted Operation Searchlight, it's been an uphill battle.'

'Yutai, my dear, I don't need you to dismantle the Yangs in Kam Shan or necessarily solve this murder at all. However, if you can find out how a prestigious and accomplished researcher like Chinh was targeted, slain and dumped in the middle of Kam Shan, you'll likely uncover larger plots within the Yang. I have at least five other researchers of almost equal importance now terrified for their lives. All I ask is that there is no repeat of this. At the very least, my district will be indebted to you.' Her wide-eyed plea and slumped shoulders were a stark contrast to the indomitable sass Yutai associated with her.

He drew in a steadying breath and braced himself to confront the grisly

sight of the poor doctor once again. *This must be the secret assignment General Denzhen wanted me to take care of.* 'Okay, Aunt. For starters, the rest of your researchers aren't safe,' Yutai said, now fully accepting this assignment.

Tong pivoted towards Yutai. 'We've already arranged protection for the team.'

'Good. Any idea when Dr Chinh was last seen alive?'

While they talked, Shing crouched down in front of the slain corpse, his gaze narrowing on the wounds of the body.

'I last saw him two cycles ago,' Tong told Yutai. 'He approached me to appeal his doctorate being stripped away by Kam Shan University. Apparently, he'd publicly said unkind things about Dr Jode and her capabilities following the expedition, which broke Kam Shan University's honour code. It was something I couldn't do much about.'

'Who's Dr Jode?' Yutai asked.

'One of the other nine researchers who also went with him into Chuan Wan Dam. She was a vocal critic of his research while there.'

'And did Dr Chinh live here in Kam Shan?' Yutai asked.

'His permanent residence is in Kam Dong, a sub-district not too far from here. But, with the arrival of the Zhaisheng, he was staying in his apartment at his old university quarters, here in the capital. He spent many nights locked up there, away from his family.'

Yutai nodded as his brain started piecing together the clues, his mind shifting gear into detective mode, scrutinising every titbit of information he received.

'I've found most of the doctor's possessions.' Shing's comment caught their attention as he rummaged through the doctor's coat. 'Wallet, ID cards, even some Hongs. But his apartment card is missing. You'd expect a researcher of Dr Chinh's stature…' Shing's hand, half-buried in the doctor's inner coat pocket, removed a ring full of keys.

'… would always carry his apartment card on his key ring.' His observation hung in the air.

Even the Black Jackets who were silently listening around nodded amongst themselves.

'Then perhaps a visit to his university quarters might bring answers. I don't have the slightest clue where his apartment card could be,' Tong said.

'That sounds like a good idea, Yutai interjected. 'A victim's residence is the best place to start any mystery. Let's try and piece together a timeline. What cycle are we on?'

'13th,' Shing replied curtly. 'But his internal temperatures tell me his heart stopped beating on the 12th. Perhaps late that cycle.'

'So, Aunt Tong sees him on the 11th because he wanted to appeal a decision made by Kam Shan University. He dies some 42 hours later.'

Right then, a Black Jacket gangster walked over to the Aunt and tapped on her shoulder, holding two boxes of hot food.

'Not me, you fool; give it to the Kingmakers,' the Aunt snapped.

'Yes, Aunty, sorry.'

The man bowed and handed them their warm boxes of food with a pair of chopsticks taped to the lids. After seeing the body, Yutai had lost what little appetite he had, but Shing cracked open the lid right away to eat. Yutai planned to give his box to Shing after they were out of sight. Both Kings thanked the Aunt, and Shing started gobbling down his food – rice with curried algae and roasted mushrooms. Yutai couldn't take his eyes off the body and wondered how Shing could compartmentalise the food he was eating after having just rummaged through someone's intestines; even his hands were still bloody. He tucked the boxed food away inside his coat's pocket.

Yutai gazed up at Tong. 'Aunt, could we have the contact details of someone close to the doctor? A colleague or family member you think he might have seen or spoken to before he died? If it's family, I prefer you break the news of his death first before giving me the phone.'

Tong nodded and turned away. 'KAANG! Get me the doctor's wife… what was her name… Ah Lam! Get her on the line. Now!'

The same Black Jacket whipped out his communication device and keyed in a number code.

Soon enough, someone handed Tong the device, and she began breaking the dreadful news.

Yutai caught the faint echo of wailing at the other end of the line – a reminder of the grief he'd avoided delivering.

Shing was still eating, while Yutai reflected on the facts of the case. A rushed murder that was designed to intimidate Aunt Tong. A targeted strike on the Emperor's Zhaisheng – while the Yang were running around trying to convince everyone Kowloonis needed to return to the surface world. The motives lined up well; every lead pointed towards their handiwork. The hard part would be figuring out how the Yang had done it all.

'… here, please talk to one of the Kingmakers.' Aunt Tong tapped on Yutai's shoulder and handed the communication device to him. He rubbed it against his trench coat to clean it, took out his left cochlear implant, and placed it in his ear.

He'd expected sobbing… and sobbing there was.

'Hello, ma'am. My name is Praefect Yutai and I'd like to extend my condolences—'

'I don't care about finding his murderer! I just want him back! I want to release his body into the Memorial Pipes, as was his wish!'

'Ma'am, I understand your pain, and we'll do everything possible to return his body once we—'

'NO! His soul is suffering every second he isn't in the Light! I want him back now!'

'Please try to understand, ma'am. This murder is much larger than your husband. We believe he was targeted because of his connection to an important project. One that would've improved many lives. He'd want this.'

'Don't you dare speak on behalf of my husband! I don't care for his selfless virtues if they're the reason for his death. He should never have worked for that bitch! She failed to protect him!'

Yutai wished Tong had better prepared the widow before transferring the call as he was untrained in consoling a grieving spouse. Her cries had now transformed into venom towards whoever was listening. Gritting his teeth, Yutai focused on what he needed, and nothing more.

'I am truly sorry, but we cannot return the body until we solve this issue.

We Kingmakers view his murder as a threat to Kowloon, and if you don't cooperate, not floating him down the Memorial Pipes will be the least of your worries. Ma'am.'

A deep, shaky breath resonated over the line as the doctor's widow regained her composure.

'Understood. Please tell me what you want to know.'

'Thank you. Did your husband contact you after the 11th, two cycles ago?'

There was a moment of silence before she spoke once more.

'Uh, no. He was on semester period, so he's always away from home. But his work with that bitch had taken over his life. Normally, he called every dimming... yet the last three cycles, no calls...'

Her words disintegrated into wails once more. Yutai knew he could offer no solace; she needed time. 'I'm sorry…' Yutai cut the line and returned the device to the Aunt.

'Get anything useful?'

'He ceased contact with his wife after his last meeting with you.'

'You know what that means, Tong?' Shing said as he closed the lid to his box, wiping the corners of his lips with his sleeve.

Aunt Tong regarded Shing with a raised brow. 'Excuse me?'

'Since it seems *you* were the last person who spoke to the doctor, you have a lot to tell us about that meeting with him. Now, I don't want you to get offended by this, but if we're going to do this right, everyone is a suspect. That means you and your *incredibly intellectual* Black Jackets too.'

Yutai could tell that subtle jab at the end was Shing's way of getting back at the Aunt's earlier comment. But she didn't brush over the remark, her gaze locked on Shing, as if about to pounce.

'That Kingmaker coat of yours has done well to protect your confidence. Be careful when that protection runs out, Shing. But if it means both of you will quit your excuses…' The Aunt cracked a smile. 'Then *interrogate away, oh lord inquisitor.'*

'That won't be necessary, Aunt,' Yutai said in a rush, not wanting a squabble to break out. 'Let's visit the doctor's quarters first, then we can plan our moves from there. Could we trouble you for a Black Jacket guide?'

8

South Kowloon Calls

Ushi and Tao sat in a booth at a pub in District Yau, enjoying their drinks. Ushi took a sip of his fruit-infused alcoholic drink and exhaled in satisfaction after the carbonated fizz hit the back of his throat.

Across the table, Tao looked at him expectantly. 'So? Any news from Ji Sia City?'

'Not really, brother. Only that Keung's actions have caused trouble for us all. But hopefully, the Luen siblings will be forgiving. Oh, I've also heard of some troubles stirring in the industrial estates of Yau. The unemployed giving people grief.'

'Yeah, I heard that too,' Tao said with a weary sigh. 'The Zhaisheng has automated many of the production lines in Yau's manufacturing plants. Profits have spiked, but almost every single labourer has lost their job.'

Ushi shook his head. 'It's been a few annui-cycle since the Zhaisheng launched in Central Kowloon, but I'm yet to see its promises of prosperity.'

'The Emperor keeps asking for time and patience… I wonder if one or both are running out.'

With a nonchalant lean, Tao lifted his glass for a sip, his gaze drifting beyond their private booth, where the rest of the dim pub buzzed with energy. Pink neon lights beneath the bar's long edge glowed and reflected off the stocky bartender standing behind it, as he chatted with patrons in

varying states of exhaustion and energy.

'Haoyu probably knows more about what's happening,' Tao suggested. 'You know bartenders… They're therapists for the drunk and lost. Big ears and bigger secrets. Seems like half the working-class men of Yau spill their guts over a pint or two here now. Go ask him.'

An irrational sense of unease always fluttered in Ushi's gut whenever he looked at Haoyu's left arm, a robotic prosthetic. The metallic limb itself wasn't the issue, but he found the exposed web of wires and the raw hydraulics unsettling. Ushi was familiar with the prosthesis model; it was supposed to be encased in sleek metal plates, providing an illusion of muscle and skin, but Haoyu's indifference for maintenance made it resemble more buzzsaw than arm.

'Looks like he's tied up,' Ushi muttered.

'Anyway, I hope we get more downtime soon. Most of our team still feel like strangers to me and it's been an entire annui-cycle since we came together. I remember how sceptical you were of the team at the start. So, what do you think of them now, brother?'

'What do *I* think?' Ushi's deep voice echoed the question as he pondered on it. He sat there, a monolith of a man , his brawny shoulders straining the seams of his buttoned shirt as he leaned back in the booth.

'Shing just can't let go of his grudge against Keung,' Ushi said, sounding both annoyed and resigned. 'I get it, we all have our issues with Keung. Teasing him was fun back in the academy, but we've moved on. Shing should do the same. When I heard about what Keung was planning to do with Jian's corpse, and him killing that poor centurion, I knew dwelling on it would only make me angrier. So, I let it go. Keung will either grow up or he won't, but Kowloon will move on.'

He paused, then his features softened. 'But Cheng… I have nothing but respect for him. Keung is our leader on paper, but Cheng is the one who really holds the reins; he keeps us together. It won't be long until he becomes a lieutenant. And he'll actually deserve it, unlike Keung. You know what? I see the beginnings of a Dragon in him.'

Tao nodded, shifting in his booth seat. 'Our team's full of good people,

I reckon. Even Keung. I never understood why people hated him simply because General Denzhen gave him everything. Sure, he didn't have to fight for it like everyone else, but he's a Yaozhi. And if people have issues with privileged Yaozhis, they'd also have issues with Yaozhi Puyin being Emperor. People forget the title of Emperor is granted through inheritance, too. Like a sort of guaranteed nepotism. Prince Tsai is a bigger nepotist than Keung, but for some reason, no one questions his advantage. So, why's it different with Keung?'

'I don't know, Tao… it just is. Everyone already accepts it's the Yaozhis that lead Kowloon. A role they've had for over a thousand annui-cycles.'

'So, according to your logic, if Keung was promoted to being Emperor of Kowloon, he would somehow be less of a nepotist?'

'No, of course not. But again, it's just *different*. Emperor Puyin has kept the peace in Kowloon. Emperor Guangxu may have started the District Rebellions, but he still knew how to run Kowloon. The same goes for every Yaozhi ancestor. They've had their highs and lows, but Kowloon is far from collapsing. Maybe Keung's real calling is to be on the throne. Maybe it isn't. But the Yaozhis have never had a calling to be a Kingmaker any more than anyone else. You still need specialised training for that. General Denzhen didn't become lieutenant until he was thirty-seven. If fairness existed in the tower, Keung would be stripped back down to centurion rank. And don't get me started on Shing! Keung may be a bad Kingmaker, but Shing's a bad person! Always running his mouth, saying the filthiest shit, and never missing a chance to stir the pot. Have you ever been on an assignment with him one on one?'

'Can't say I've had the pleasure,' Tao drawled.

'Flagrant catcalling, shouting slurs in public, provoking fights, pulling violent pranks. He's a bigoted piece of scum. And I can't even figure out if he's attracted to women, or if he hates them… but I started hating him long before I found out about all that.

Tao leaned in. 'Really? What made you hate him?'

'Remember back during Operation Searchlight? A few menses-cycles before the Yau bombings?'

Tao nodded.

Operation Searchlight had left scars on Ushi. Last annui-cycle, with the Yang presence growing like a wildfire in Yau, the Luen siblings sought Kingmaker assistance to curb the threat. In response, the Kingmakers placed the entire southern diaspora in Yau under suspicion. Mass arrests ensued, prompting fierce resistance among southerners that ultimately led to their violent deportation back to South Kowloon – a massive inter-district population exchange. Many died and many more are unaccounted to even this day.

This was a dark chapter in Ushi's life, cuffing brown-skinned Kowloonis who cried to him in his native southern dialect.

'We did depraved things to stop the Yang spreading, but it was all in vain,' Tao said with a sigh. 'In the end, the Yau bombings still happened. Why bring up the memory?'

'It's only a rumour. But I heard people from Shing's team were among the more overzealous of the lot. They made sure to have their fun while making their arrests. Hundreds of women claimed to have been… violated by the Ji Sia gang. At least a dozen women mentioned one team in particular – a squad of Ji Sia, overseen by a Kingmaker carrying a red, oversized sniper rifle.'

Tao's lips curled. 'I can't believe it. Are you saying they raped them?'

'You know how history has treated my southern sisters during times of conflict?'

Tao flushed. 'That southern women are the best spoils of war. *They provide... the most comfort...* Then I wouldn't be surprised they got away with it easily. Those Southern immigrants we targeted in Yau never had the law on their side. But was Shing really part of this? He's a bigot, but I never pegged him as a monster.'

'At the very least, he knew what his Ji Sia subordinates were up to. Ultimately, that's why the Yang felt it necessary to retaliate. If we had had fewer Shings during the operation, maybe the Yau bombings wouldn't have happened. And Yutai, his so-called best friend, is no better. I know for a fact he cringes whenever Shing acts like a clown, but does he ever say

anything? He *enables* that shit. Yutai is a pushover and will do anything to avoid conflict. One day, Shing's gonna piss off the wrong person, and Yutai will end up paying the price.'

Tao nodded and took another sip. 'It's difficult operating as a team with this much division. Maybe the growing Yang situation will pull us all closer.'

'Yeah well, one annui-cycle with them already seems too much,' Ushi retorted. 'I'm not expecting heart-to-heart bonding sessions with any of my team. Maybe I'll give Cheng a chance. But Shing? I'd sooner renounce my southern blood.'

Suddenly, the noise level in the lively pub dropped. All Ushi heard was hushed whispers.

'Oi, Ushi, Tao, look here! Ain't that the Yang?' Haoyu's prosthetic arm swung toward the wide screen that held every patron's attention.

'What the…? Is that…' Tao's question drifted into muted suspense as he stared at the screen: A masked man clad in red robes and milk-white armour stood on the ledge of a building. He was in the middle of addressing a massive crowd below with a microphone.

'Tao, I think that's *the Ibilis*,' Ushi's brow creased. He dove for his holocommunicator buried beneath his trench coat and cap on the seat beside him.

Six missed calls from Cheng... Damn! I didn't think I'd have to answer a call this late into the sleep-cycle!

'Fuck, what do we do?!' Tao asked.

'We head to Ho Man Ting right now,' Ushi replied, already grabbing his things and standing up. 'If Cheng and the others are there, they'll need our help.'

****

Shing and Yutai continued walking through the dimmed streets of Kam Shan, escorted by a Black Jacket gangster named Kaang.

'Don't tell anyone this, but I've always dreamed of riding the King rail,' Kaang confessed as he hurried along beside Yutai and Shing. His greased hair flopped with his large steps, his sagging pants sliding down his thin frame every few strides.

'It's really nothing much,' Yutai said noticing Kaang's awed expression. A whole head taller than Kaang, both Kingmakers cast an intimidating shadow.

'You wanna know what it's like on the rail?' Shing asked mischievously.

'What do you mean?'

'Get on Yutai's shoulders and he'll jump up and down while I shake you left and right. That there would be an accurate simulation.'

'No way the King rail is *that* bad.'

'It isn't, Kaang,' Yutai said as he stifled his laugh. 'Shing! The Emperor didn't spend almost a trillion Hongs on the rail just for you to bash it to everyone!' Yutai turned to Kaang. 'If there's one thing we Kingmakers are masters at, its complaining.'

Kaang raised his palms in surrender. 'Hey now, you won't be catching my Black Jacketed ass criticising the Kingmakers about anything.'

'We better not!' Shing jested.

They ambled through the archaic corridor on the ground level of a towering groundscraper. Walking through the dim passage, the trio took in the unique features of Old Kowloon – shops huddled under flickering bulbs, dusty windows, exposed brick walls with peeling paint, and clattering air vents. The ground, a patchwork of uneven cement slabs and open sewage channels, added to the raw, musty scent of the old city.

As their footsteps echoed against the ancient stones, Yutai thought of something to say. 'You know,' he began, his voice blending with the rumble of distant vents. 'The leader of our team has a similar name to yours. The Emperor's own nephew.'

'Yaozhi Keung?' Kaang clarified with a hint of apprehension. 'He's been on the news a lot recently. With that Jian stuff.'

Shing flashed a knowing smirk. 'Then you've heard of the best of our lieutenant. We have a team of six and turns out the guy meant to lead us is our weakest link.'

'May I speak my mind?' Kaang asked as he loosened the sleeves of his black jacket. Yutai kept silent, but Shing gave a welcoming nod.

'People out west have little respect for Yaozhi Keung,' Kaang continued. 'His mother died because of him during the rebellions, which led to General

Denzhen losing control of King-controlled Huang territory. We all learned in school what a shitshow that was.'

'Now I'm not a fan of defending Keung,' Yutai interjected. 'But I think it's a bit unfair to speak as though he killed his mother. It was childbirth for crying out loud. Shit, if we're blaming Keung for his mother dying, I better start hearing you two claim responsibility for every rip, tear, and stretch you caused *your* mothers.'

There was no reply, the awkwardness of the conversation punctuated by the echoes of their footsteps.

The three entered a small, dimly lit food court that was closed for the sleep-cycle. Small, shuttered shops formed a silent square around deserted tables and chairs, with dusty arcade game machines lining the back walls. Daytime lamps hung overhead like a spectral gallery, extinguished and casting no glow. Creeping fungal vines draped the fronts of the small, two-storey shops sandwiched under the ceiling, which served as both homes and business.

Walking through the desolate square, they nudged aside tables and ducked under umbrella shades until Kaang led them to a tall, arched gate in the corner. Its black iron bars yielded with a swift key swipe, revealing a cobblestone stairway descending between two looming groundscrapers.

Kaang spoke up out of nowhere. 'I'm not sure how much you two know of Kam Shan history, but we once had legendary family, the *Fong clan*.'

Both Kings listened attentively as he continued, 'The Fong's produced a long line of military strategists for Aunt Tong's family, earning a formidable reputation in the Western Reaches. During the great rebellions, when Yaozhi Denzhen vanished from the front lines, it allowed for a southern charge that almost reached Kam Shan's capital. Unfortunately, the Fong family home was in their path. All the men were out fighting the war, leaving the women and children defenceless. Everyone inside was slaughtered, the entire castle was charred black from a fire after. Lord-Captain Winsen Fong returned from the war with no family to welcome him back. Despite Aunt Tong's pleas for him to remarry and revive the clan's future, he refused and died a lonely old man a couple of annui-cycles ago. His famous last words were, *'The world does not deserve us Fongs, so I'm taking us back.'* No one in Kam

Shan has any illusions about the loss of our great Fong clan. You understand now why we westerners think Keung's existence is a bad omen for us all.'

'I'm not surprised at all,' Shing said without missing a beat. 'The legendary Dragon Yaozhi Denzhen, revered for his strategic prowess, crumbled under the weight of Keung's birth. The southern front plunged into chaos, and if it wasn't for Gen… Jian and the other Dragons, everything would have been lost. Keung's more than a bad omen; the Light seems to avoid any path he walks.'

General Denzhen is a great man, Shing, Yutai thought. *He doesn't deserve such vitriol because of Keung.*

'But is it true Keung made it to Lieutenant in the fastest time ever because of the favour his father grants him?' Kaang asked.

Shing nodded. 'That's the damn truth. Keung became praefect at 16, a tribune at 20, legate at 22 and a goddamn lieutenant just one cycle later. Even Yutai can agree that becoming a lieutenant at 23 has been the biggest bastardisation of our Kingmaker name.'

Yutai offered a shallow nod. *Can't even disagree with him there.*

'It takes at least a decade of Kingmaker training to even be considered for lieutenant,' Shing added. 'Unless you're a born prodigy like General Cao. And I can tell you right now, Keung is no Cao; he is talentless, with a nose so high it puts some of these groundscrapers to shame.'

Shing, you need to shut up! Yutai glared at Shing, which went unnoticed. W*e shouldn't be painting such poor images of ourselves to outsiders!*

But Shing continued. 'Did you know he recently got beaten up by three other Kings who were, what, just regular centurions?'

Shing... that's private Kingmaker information! Yutai clenched his jaw in frustration, hoping he'd stop.

'Centurion. Kaang, that's *the* lowest field rank for a Kingmaker. A lieutenant Kingmaker should be able to take on five praefecti blindfolded. I find myself not wanting to ever become a lieutenant because of Keung. Oh, and don't get me started on his lapdog, Cheng, the second weakest link in our group! His *brave* knight-defender—'

'Enough, brother!' Yutai thundered, cutting the conversation short. 'Let's

change the subject. This conversation is growing tiresome.' Though he didn't entirely disagree with Shing's argument about Keung's nepotism, Yutai knew what he was saying was inappropriate for a Kingmaker. He glowered at Shing, who just shrugged.

'Yeah,' Shing grumbled. 'Talking about Keung too long does tend to become boring. Apologies, Kaang. Let's talk about you. What's it like working under Tong? Actually no. Tell me more about that monster standing behind her at the den.'

'You mean Shou Feng?' Kaang squeaked as his walking pace slowed. 'I avoid talking about him really, as do the other Jackets. His temper has always been explosive, but after they made his hands iridium, his anger could easily kill you. It's happened a few times. Some guys I was even friends with. The Aunt's warned us about looking at him for too long.'

'Is he really her son?' Shing asked. 'I can't even imagine him ever being small enough to come out of a woman's cunt.'

'Yes, the Aunt's son and personal guard. Ever since the Tei Lung incident, she's kept him on a short leash. The Aunt worries about his unchecked anger sparking another political catastrophe for Kam Shan.'

'You're going to find this hard to believe,' Yutai interjected. 'But one of our squad mates is almost as big as him.'

Shing smirked, 'I had the same thought. Do you think Ushi would have a chance against him, brother?'

'Hardly. Shou looked to be half a man wider than our Ushi! And against those iridium fists? Perhaps if Ushi had a similar advantage, we'd get ourselves one nasty fight.'

Shing raised an eyebrow. 'But remember, he still has the fighting skill of a Kingmaker. A praefect no less and—'

'But experience plays a crucial role,' Kaang chimed in before Shing could finish. 'Shou has been running around doing assignments alongside our Black Jacket veterans since he was eight. He's 38 now. He's spent three decades honing his skills and building every muscle to its biological maximum. How old is Ushi? Similar to you two? Early 20s?'

'Yeah, that's a good point, Kaang. Ushi seems like a child in comparison,'

Yutai said. 'But it'd be interesting to see a fight between the two.'

Shing blew out a breath, 'Are you fucking kidding me?' he laughed in disbelief. 'Kingmaker training has nothing on age differences! That *dangdexue* southerner may be a dumbass, but I'd empty my pockets any day to see Ushi crush Shou! As long as my pockets return twice as heavy, which they would.'

'I suppose we'll never know,' Yutai said with a shrug, ending the debate.

They now stood at the mouth of a stony footbridge, looking at a wide, grey building at the other end.

'Is that it, Kaang?' Yutai asked.

'Yep, that's the University of Kam Shan. It's nothing fancy like Yau Technical, but it's probably the most attractive university in all of the Western Reaches. Dr Chinh's lab quarters are a few floors up from the foyer.'

'It's an impressive building. Bigger than I thought it would be,' Yutai said. It was imposing, with expansive glass windows, strips of strobing LED lights, and meticulous hedges. Spotlights perched at ground level illuminated the walls of the structure, casting a soft glow that ascended to the uppermost floors, resembling white pillars against the grey, brutalist structure.

As they walked across the bridge, Yutai stepped to the side to peer down the bridge to the streets and alleyways below. Muted conversations and laughter wafted up from the huddles of people who went about their business.

'This is a very quiet side of the capital,' Yutai commented as he rejoined the other two. 'I didn't know any place in the West could get this desolate during the dimming.'

'That's because we've been walking through the richest parts of Fengcheng for the better part of this journey,' Kaang said. 'Most folk here actually *sleep* during the dimming. Wild, huh?'

Upon reaching the main entrance, Yutai wasn't surprised to find the glass doors locked with a small glowing blue screen beside it. With a swift touch from Kaang, they sprung open to reveal a white-washed hallway bathed in lights that sequentially flickered to life. The immaculate white tiles reflected the soft glow and echoed their footsteps, leading them past a series of empty

laboratories.

Beyond the maze of labs, a vast lobby emerged, filled with a sea of study desks and a sweeping staircase leading to more corridors above. Mini supercomputers were integrated into the scattered study tables, all dwarfed by a towering glass pillar housing an elevator. The trio advanced towards it and Kaang pressed a button to open its doors.

'Hold any degrees, Kaang?' Shing asked, breaking the silence. The three stepped inside and Kaang pressed a button to take them to the 5th level.

'Anyone with a degree wouldn't be a Black Jacket grunt for the Aunt. I've never quite fit in with the book-smart types, so I'm not losing sleep over the fact that I can barely read.'

The glass lift rose higher and higher until it came to a halt. The doors slid open to reveal another long hallway, its lights turning on one-by-one. They walked in silence for a few minutes until Kaang stopped by a closed door on their left.

'Here we are, boys. Doctor Chinh's quarters.'

Kaang swiped a card over the room's security pad. The small screen loaded as they waited for it to unlock.

Pii-puu.

It flashed red, remaining locked.

'You got the right key?' Shing asked.

'Of course. These locks work by communicating with some server. Maybe they're down.'

Kaang tried again but the same thing happened.

Yutai threw a glance over his shoulder at the hallway, seriously entertaining the idea of heading back.

BANG!!

Kaang jumped back and Yutai spun around with his hand on his holstered gun. Not known for his patience, Shing had shot the security pad, causing the door to shudder and jam open.

'Subtlety, brother! Did you forget where we are?!' Yutai shook his head and lead the way into the doctor's shadowy room. Shing shrugged, mouthing a mute 'What?' before following after Yutai. Kaang brought up the rear.

After Kaang flipped the light switch, the space flooded with soft, warm illumination.

Piles of scientific texts and academic journals lay strewn across a desk adorned with antiquated scientific paraphernalia. High-tech gadgets half-assembled and devices with exposed wiring and circuitry peered out from the cluttered shelves, giving an air of controlled chaos to the otherwise austere surroundings.

Looks to have been working on many things at once, Yutai thought.

Framed degrees, certificates, and photographs with other acclaimed scientists covered a single wall on the far-left side. Dr Chinh's quarters resembled a studio apartment, with everything in one open space.

On the other side of the room, Yutai saw a tack board on the wall littered with printed newspaper articles. Many of them were about the same thing – abnormal sewer rodent sightings. Among them were photographs capturing freakishly massive bite marks on other dead creatures, along with a local boy posing with a colossal, severed rat tail. One article even reported a sewer rodent carcass the size of a southern canine clogging a call centre's ventilation system.

'ANIMAL OR MONSTER? SIGHTINGS OF SUPER RODENTS INCREASE AROUND WEST KOWLOON.'

'Wow, look at this! Computer is still hibernating,' Shing called out from the doctor's study.

'Check his recent communications. Might find a clue, brother.'

Yutai continued to leaf through the clippings pinned to the tackboard, which included a cluster of hand-written notes of calculus and algebra from a 'Dr Jode'. Spiky, angry scribbles in red pen, some almost scoring the paper through, annotated the complex handwritten mathematical equations.

'What the fuck is this, Jode?' was commented beside a line of work.

'How did you get this wrong? A Hui's Law equation never results in a complex number!' Dr Chinh had pointed out the error with an arrow. These were just two of many comments, across multiple pages.

*I remember the Aunt mentioned Dr Jode,*Yutai thought. *She was one of the researchers who joined the expedition into Chuan Wan Dam. Aunt Tong said*

Dr Chinh's unprofessional remarks about her led the university to revoke his doctorate. Judging by these corrections alone, he detested this Dr Jode's work. I wonder what he said about her that led to that happening.

As he peered closer to work out the context behind these equations, the holocommunicator on his wrist pierced the silence.

'Who's that?' Shing called out.

'Cheng… Wonder why he's calling this late?'

…

'Hello? Sir, is everything okay? Hello?' Yutai spoke into his wrist.

'Grrzt-rother, brother, can you hear me? Yutai, are you there? Yutai?'

Despite the terrible connection, Cheng sounded agitated.

'Yes sir, I can hear you. What's going on?!'

'I -brrzt- help. We need your help. Get to Ho—n Ting. -brrzt- are all here...- Shing, too.'

'Sorry sir, you're breaking up. Where?'

'Ho M—-n —ing. Ho Man —ing. The square. Rooftop — the mall. We think -brrzt- Ibilis has rallied a mob brrzzt Yang—'

'Ho Man Ting, the square, mall rooftop, understood. We're coming now.'

Yutai hung up and looked up at Shing. 'This is urgent, brother. We need to make for Man Ting. Now.' He turned to Kaang. 'Where can we find the nearest King rail?'

'It's not far; I can take you there. Ten minutes at a run!'

As Yutai took a step forward towards the door, the wails of Ah Lam – Dr Chinh's grieving wife – rang in his head. If he left now, there was almost no chance the doctor's body would be returning to her soon. Then there was General Denzhen's order of staying in Kam Shan until he fulfilled the Aunt's request.

'Brother! What are you waiting for?' Shing asked, already half out the door with their Black Jacket escort.

Yutai bit his lip. 'I don't know, Shing. The lady I spoke to over the phone was distraught over Chinh.'

'And? Did you promise her you were going to solve this shit tonight?!'

'No, of course not. The Aunt said she'd release the doctor's body before the

lanterns reignite if we started investigating tonight. We jeopardise meeting our end of the deal if we leave now. Besides, the Light awaits that poor man in the Memorial Pipes. It's best we don't interfere with divine processes – for the sake of the ones awaiting us.'

'You always have to overcomplicate things. All right,' Shing began, resolve hardening in his voice. 'I'll go with Kaang to the King rail and get to the Square. Stay here and figure something out with this shit.'

'But what about Cheng?' Yutai asked. He knew the tribune wouldn't take kindly to Yutai disobeying his summons.

'I'll handle him. Come on, Kaang, let's hurry!'

'Wait!' Yutai walked over and pulled Shing's hand in for a hug. 'Thank you, brother. But if things escalate, call me, okay?'

Shing gave a quick nod. 'I will. See you soon.'

As Shing rushed out, Kaang close on his heels, the Black Jacket called over his shoulder, 'Yutai sir, please don't forget to lock the doors of the university as you leave. Or I might be invited to the Aunt's next tea party.'

'Got it. Now go!' Yutai yelled back, sending Kaang sprinting off.

Once he was alone, Yutai switched on the camera on his holocommunicator and recorded the array of articles, photographs, and frenzied mathematical equations pinned to the board to study later. In the eerie stillness, the click of each picture seemed deafeningly loud.

Yutai turned around and looked at the desk that Shing was at earlier. *Didn't he say the computer was hibernating?* He walked over and tapped on the touch pad on the table. The screen switched on. It was already sitting in his mailbox.

Probably what Shing was checking before he had to leave.

Yutai navigated through its directories, searching for the last communication exchange.

Ten cycles ago? No, that's not right; no one's network mail sits this empty for ten days straight. Not even spam in the last ten days. It's all been cleared. Maybe that's why his card was missing and his room was hard-locked. Someone came in here to make sure we don't find out who he was talking to in the days leading to his death.

Yutai took a step back with both hands on his hip and sighed.

This better not be a dead end. Hmm, I wonder? He approached the computer screen again and felt along its frame. As his fingers traced behind the frame of the monitor, he felt the crinkle of a taped piece of folded paper. Tearing it off, he squinted to read the tiny writing: *XRP01320123.* It was a Kowlooni communication number. The first three letters represented the district code of the number. XRP was a Ho Man Ting number.

Ho Man Ting? That's where Cheng called us from. A coincidence?

Yutai dialled the number into his holocommunicator, bouncing on his toes in anticipation.

The line rang once. Then again. Then once more.

Someone picked up. Yutai stayed quiet.

'Hello? Doctor?'

The voice was deep and digitised.

'Who's this?' Yutai demanded.

'.....'

Beep.

The caller hung up. Yutai took notice of the call's timestamp.

He chuckled. *Got you! Ten seconds is all I needed! You fucked up by picking up, whoever you are. You never answer a Kingmaker's call.*

Yutai approached the computer again to trace the number. His fingers danced over the keys on the table, then he inserted his Kingmaker root program, a cable from his holocommunicator, into a computer slot below the desk. A cascade of data flooded the screen as he gained control over the system's back end, cryptic lines of code and strings of information unfurling in a matrix-like display.

Amidst the avalanche of technical jargon and complex directories, Yutai unearthed the call log of his holocommunicator. Each second stretched into eternity as he waited on the coordinates from the trace. Finally, they popped up on the screen.

The 13th floor of Ho Man Ting University, in the heart of the square. The same place Tribune Cheng called from; where Shing is headed right now! It can't be a coincidence. Now I'm certain the Yang are involved. I need to go to its source –

maybe our mystery caller is still there.

His heart pounding in his chest, Yutai punched in a waypoint to the nearest King rail on his holo communicator's projector. He grabbed his gear and bolted towards the door.

9

The Zhanshi Monster

Keung, cocooned in solitude, grasped blindly for his ringing holocommunicator on the bedside table. The late hour had chased away all visitors from the infirmary, leaving him to recuperate alone. He answered the call and found his father, Denzhen, at the other end of the line.

'Hello, Ba. How are you?' Keung's voice carried the weariness of his recovery.

'I'm holding up, Keung. But how are you faring? Have I disturbed your rest?'

'No, I'm fine, Ba. Almost recovered. I got put into EM therapy, so I'm pretty much recovered. I may get discharged tomorrow.'

'What were the injuries? I know they were bad, but to undergo EM therapy...'

'I was okay. The therapies did their job; the second round fixed everything.'

'They had to use the device twice?' His father's voice dipped. *'Light, it was that bad? Yutai downplayed the incident.'*

'No, sounds like whatever Yutai told you was right; it wasn't a big deal.' Keung countered. 'I actually feel good. How about after I'm out you finally show me how to do that powerful dragon kick of yours, huh?' He tried injecting a note of levity into the conversation.

Silence seeped through the connection. Keung waited for a familiar chuckle or a teasing response, but there was nothing. 'Ba? Are you okay?'

'You were at death's door, weren't you?' his father murmured. *'You were nearly*

killed.'

'Ba, I said it was nothing. But get this: the adrenal pumps you and I fought over actually ended up saving my life. How about that?' He forced a laugh, hoping to dispel the grim atmosphere.

'He nearly died,' his father murmured once more, the words a soft lament as though he were talking to himself.

Forcing himself into a sitting position, Keung attempted to shift the focus. 'Ba, please, enough of this. Where are you?'

'I was with Lok and Ying.'

'The siblings?' Keung's face coloured as he realised his father was having to run around cleaning up his mess, offering apologies on his behalf.

'How did it go?'

'Well, they're frustrated. We haven't been on good terms with them since the Yau bombings. This Yang situation is growing too fast; I fear we can't keep up. Why did you have to run after Jian's body, Keung? Didn't you think twice about... Ah, don't worry, it was inevitable one of ours would do what you did, and those other three really did. I have to go now. If you're getting out tomorrow, you'll be up and about the next time I see you. Sorry, I couldn't come to visit you. I did try.'

'Sorry for creating such a mess, Ba.'

'It's okay, Keung. Something urgent has come up. I have to go, sorry. Talk soon, I love you.'

The abrupt end to the call disconcerted Keung, leaving him to his thoughts and the beeping stillness of the dark infirmary room.

He sighed and put his holocommunicator back on the side table.

Lying back on his pillow, Keung stared at the ceiling, unable to sleep. His body had healed for the most part, yet he still felt a mild pain from his injuries. His lungs still ached when he breathed and movement felt sluggish. The afternoon's laughter-filled reunion with his squad echoed in his memory as they rarely got together outside of missions. He decided to turn on the television and watch the district news to distract himself.

He reached out to the side table in the dark in search of a remote and switched on the entertainment console. A monitor display slid out of the ceiling above the foot of his bed. The channel it landed on was showing an

old romance movie he knew of.

'He never loved you... but I did, Zhong-Zhong! Kiss me, darl—!'

The dramatic line was cut off by the buzz of his holocommunicator, a buzz from a shared communication channel between Keung and his detachment. He ignored it and flicked through the channels to find something else to watch.

'And Xiaojun scores another point for the Ghuzu Giants—' The enthusiastic commentary of a zuche game was interrupted by another buzzing interruption.

Probably late-night banter... though it's been a while since we've had this much chatter on the private group channel.

Dismissing the buzz, Keung finally landed on the news channel. With a tired arm, he placed the remote on his chest to watch, feeling the cool metal against the warm blanket.

'... leaves us wondering why the Kingmakers allegedly stole the body of former Dragon, the notorious and outspoken Yang terrorist, Wenben Jian.'

The news anchor's voice was a practised blend of concern and curiosity. Keung leaned into the crisp words, his attention sharpening.

'Yau district member and acting relations officer for the Luen government, Youlan Fabu, has told us it happened without the knowledge of the Ji Sia elders and the Luen siblings. We have reached out to the Kingmakers but have yet to receive any comment. Let's cut to an eyewitness from the Gujin Bazaar who saw the events unfold.'

Keung raised an eyebrow. The news cut to a man in the familiar chaos of the bazaar, atop one of its high balconies. He seemed young, and the type of person you'd expect to be at the bazaar. He had buzzed, bleached hair, and a collection of face tattoos. His name scrolled across the bottom of the screen: 'Xho Kento, eyewitness.'

People moved around the man in a blur, the familiar bustle of Gujin Bazaar that Keung remembered.

'So sir, what did you see?' an off-screen voice asked.

Keung realised this news segment was a pre-recorded interview from yesterday. It must've aired only hours after he was there himself. His actions

were, after all, breaking news.

'I was drinking with my friends and dancing to some West-Kow House and high off a Yapyan pill when I see some crazy guys climbing down from the fucking ceiling to where that ol' Yang guy was chilling. Right there under the Gujin Clock. I looked outside and there they were – three men in black trench coats with gold-striped sleeves hangin' off the ceiling. Well slap a peaked hat on me and call me Cao because that there was one of them Kingmakers! And they're just casually untying the guy! Then they flew away or whatever it is they do.' Kent's vivid recollection poured out in a rush of candid disbelief, delivered through Yau street slang.

'Now, I'm no political scientist, but if we was caught messin' with a crucifix, Lok himself would behead us! I thought my Yapyan pill had me tripping higher than the Shing he Tower, so I went back to drinking and popping more pills and you won't believe what I see not long after! There I am, standing outside the club and smoking a gold-pack 20s of Quadruple-Happiness, and I spot another one of them trench coat Kingmaker guys climbing the balconies! By himself! I thought, man, I am never taking these pills—'

A screen full of static abruptly cut off Kento Ho's tale. The ominous garble had Keung on edge as such interruptions during the news were often precursors to major events.

Suddenly, it cast back to the news anchor in the studio, but a different man now, signalling a switch from the previous rerun to live news.

'We apologise for interrupting the interview with breaking news from the southern Ho Man Ting district. Our reporter is live at the capital. Jeni Laozi will take it from here.'

The anchor's gaze shifted off screen, 'Jeni?'

Ho Man Ting? What's going on down there? Keung wondered. The impoverished southern districts rarely got a breaking news segment, as the south of Kowloon was always in some state of chaos. The media had given up on reporting much of anything down there, with most Kowloonis hearing big news through word of mouth. He wondered what kind of event could have upended this journalistic norm.

Following a few seconds of static, the screen filled with the image of a

young reporter, Jeni Laozi, standing amid a bustling crowd. White lines streaked the air in a light drizzle. The relentless wind tousled Jeni's hair, playing hide and seek with her face. She wore thick clothes to combat the southern climate, a puffer jacket and a beanie. Keung could see the reporter in the middle of a crowd, all of whom were gazing past her at something off-camera, high in the air. Many members of the crowd wore masks and other makeshift face covers to hide their identities.

The backdrop was an unmistakable scene from the heart of District Ho Man Ting, the grand courtyard of Ho Man Ting Square. The shouts and commotion from the crowd suggested it was far larger than the visuals implied.

Emperor Puyin had recently funded the grand courtyard as part of his Zhaisheng, modelled after the lavish Taiku Xhing Courtyard in North Kowloon. This initiative aimed to strengthen South Kowloon's ties with the Yaozhi Dynasty's Kingmakers, easily the most troubled and strained relationship in all of Kowloon. Along with the gift of the square, a grand university and a mall were established on either side, enhancing its utility.

However, tonight, the courtyard was seeing more bustle than it ever had, which meant something given the region's dense population.

'This is Jeni Laozi; we are here in the Ho Man Ting courtyard where a flash mob of Yang sympathisers has gathered with other general members of the public. By the time the Tien Tao Rioters received word—'

*'**..appear before you with a heavy heart.**'*

'— attempted to use force to disperse the mob, a masked figure appeared on the ledge of HMT University. Since then, the crowd has grown by the thousands out of nowhere.'

A louder, distinct voice with an odd accent drowned out Jeni's. The south's tempest became the chaotic backdrop for the unfolding drama, and an ache crept into Keung's gut.

The restless camera wavered, capturing the young reporter's concerned expression before panning left and upwards to reveal a masked figure perched high above the crowd on the university ledge at the front of the square. As the camera zoomed in and focused on the figure, it passed over

the tops of thousands, no, tens of thousands of heads. Keung gaped in disbelief at the true magnitude of the gathering. The courtyard was packed to the brim, comparable to a stadium hosting the world zuche finals.

A shrouded, spectral figure towered on the ledge's edge, arms flung wide as if in grand declaration. He stood upon the cliff of chaos, the swirling maw of humanity's distress splayed out below him. Below his feet, tied to the ledge, was a long red banner, flapping in the wind like a giant tongue gone mad, emblazoned with the symbol of the Yang – a bird ensnared in a thorny circle.

Upon recognising the symbol, a disquieting shiver slithered down Keung's spine. He knew then the terrifying figure was none other than Mogwei, or to his enemies, the notorious Ibilis of the Yang. A living painting of power and danger, cloaked in plates of white armour around his torso that glinted ominously. Tucked under the chest plate was baggy, blood-red hood robes. Keung recalled those robes from intelligence.

That's no ordinary cloth. Graphene-weave, Keung thought.

But it was the mask that held him transfixed. A horrifying representation of the Zhanshi monster. The face of an unsettling nightmare come to life.

Two crimson eyes glowed with rage from the mask's distorted face like the eyes of a man pushed beyond the edge of his own sanity. The grotesque smile, with four elongated canines, seemed to mock the world.

Haunted by bedtime stories from his aunt, Empress Cixi, the tale of Zhanshi stood out – a fiercely patriotic soul who one day woke up in a distant land, the surface world. Yearning to return to his motherland, Zhanshi descended into the desolate caves of No Man's Land. His patriotism turned to rage and despair as he wandered in circles, losing his way in the ancient sewers that connected his home, Kowloon, with the mythical surface level. Before long, he was driven mad with a mental affliction known as No Man's Paranoia. In a final act of tragedy and insanity, deep underground, he cursed the dark creatures of No Man's Land, dooming them to monstrous growth and viciousness. Yet, this folklore evoked a twisted pride among the Yang, embodying their extreme love for Kowloon – a love that inspired both devotion and violent passion.

Keung's mind wrenched itself back to the present. He found himself hanging onto every word that spilled from the masked man's mouth.

'... **with our lives no less.***'* The masked figure's thunderous voice reverberated across the square. **But the painful reality is that, from Shenzhen to Nam Bato, the streets are filled with desperation and grief. The East starves. The West may not know it, but they are on the brink of divine punishment. In the Huang Wildlands, the blood of our starved brethren stains the floors of every building red, from the ground to the peaks of the 100th levels. Today, the people of Kowloon want freedom, the people of Kowloon want to survive, and the people of Zhongguo want to return to their homes and seize their right to a dignified life! The Yaozhi's Mandate of Heaven has been smashed, and all can see it!'**

The crowd roared as multiple spotlights from below shone on the Ibilis above, casting him in an unearthly glow.

'Losing Jian pains us, but his Dragon spirit bolsters our own with a resolve our movement has never seen before!'

Keung gripped the edge of his bed and gritted his teeth. *What are the Yangs doing coming out this publicly? Such an appearance is unprecedented!*

'And so begins a new chapter of our cause. With the reigniting of lanterns every morn, more of our siblings awaken to the iron cage they've been slumbering within. We all feel the impending doom of our underground existence. Our numbers are now vast, and our silent allies even more so!'

The crowd's cheers were deafening, seeping into the corners of his consciousness. Keung noticed that every high-rise groundscraper hugging the square had people crowding the windows and balconies, all attuned to the Ibilis's speech.

Are they all cheering him?

'We hereby state the demands of the Yang. Our FIRST demand...'

The masked figure raised a single finger in the air, demanding his crowd bear witness.

'Immediate revocation of martial law across Kowloon. Henceforth, we consider any thug wielding weapons on behalf a Lord or Lady an enemy of

Kowloon and its people. Our SECOND demand...'

The figure pointed a second digit into the air.

'Power belongs in the hands of Kowloon's people. From landowners to corporate leaders, it's time to return control to its rightful owners. Our workers will be the masters of their own labour, enabling us to produce everything we require for our exodus to the surface – food, vehicles, weapons. No mother will fear for their child's safety through No Man's Land, for our neighbours will become the family protecting us. The time for disarmament is over; everyone will wield a tool to charge forward with, be it a rifle, a hammer, or a farming-sic.'

Fear shot through Keung's veins. He had expected the crowd to be furious with the public demands of a terrorist, not celebrate them.

'Our THIRD demand.'

Keung had never witnessed such a united front among Yang supporters. The mass cheering unsettled him to the point where he was completely frozen.

Have I become divorced from reality, or am I just witnessing a vocal minority among Kowloon's millions?

'AND OUR FINAL AND MOST IMPORTANT ORDER...'

The figure, his voice now pulsing with fervour, thumped his chest and thrust his fist skyward as he spoke.

'Puyin and the Kingmakers' unconditional surrender of the Ditu over to the people of Kowloon, for true freedom will only come once we depart from the chains of the underground! By his word, the Prophet Dong has promised you!'

A tidal wave of cheers ensued, so deafening that the reporter's microphone stuttered, its audio cutting in and out every few seconds.

The camera pivoted back to Jeni, the onsite reporter. Her voice was a mere ghost against the uproarious backdrop, despite her shouts into the microphone.

'Well, there you have it! The Yangs have, for the first time, delivered a list of demands. We know they have been chasing the Ditu for a while now, but it seems they've outlined steps to reach their final goal. What can this mean

for the—'

The sound of a bone-rattling, high-powered rifle punched through the entertainment console's speakers. It was familiar to Keung. *Is that a PAW12?* Chaos erupted. The camera careened wildly as the cameraman dove for safety. Jubilant cheers morphed into shrill screams.

*'- Shot *zzrrrttttt* Gunshot—'* The reporter's words disappeared in the turmoil.

The camera, momentarily fixated on the ground, lurched to capture the crowd's pandemonium. Heads were bobbing, bodies darting in every direction. The camera then swivelled back to the ledge, still shaking too much to truly focus. The Ibilis sat motionless, with his back pressed to the wall.

Have the Tien Tao Rioters reached the scene? Keung wondered. *Have they taken him out?*

Then the figure slowly stood back up.

The camera refocused, revealing an indentation near the top of the mask, fractures spider-webbing across its face. The rifle round had failed to penetrate it; Keung realised this was no ordinary mask you'd find at a festival.

Shaking his head, the Ibilis bent down to retrieve his fallen microphone.

'Brothers and sisters, they mean to silence me! This isn't over; do not let our dreams perish!'

With a defiant throw, he hurled the microphone into the roiling sea of bodies, where the resulting stampede crushed it. In a flash, the Ibilis reached for a long, thick chain on the ledge in front of him and launched himself into the air.

At that very moment, a barrage of gunfire erupted from the rooftop of Ho Man Ting Mall, on the opposite side of the courtyard, targeting the masked man who had just jumped off the edge like a mad man.

Keung watched, aghast, as bullets traced the Ibilis's path. The chain snapped taut after the man reached the maximum length of the line, and just like a pendulum, he hurtled back towards the massive red banner beneath his former perch.

His oversized red robe unfurled from his neck mid-air, flowing like a cape. Just as it seemed he would crash into the banner and the wall behind it, he turned sideways, extended his legs and tore through the banner, shattering a hidden window behind it, and vanished.

The gunfire that had been chasing him stopped just as quickly as it began, leaving only the screams and cries of the crowd and the colossal, flapping Yang banner.

Suddenly, the screen went black, replaced with a "Technical Issues" prompt. Keung fell back on his bed, speechless, struggling to process the chain of events he had just witnessed live.

10

Foreigners

'Thank you, ma'am.' Keung bowed to the nurse as she handed him his gear. Echoes of last night's news from Ho Man Ting haunted his memory as he walked to the nearest elevators. The tower was abuzz during the early hours, Kingmakers rushing in every direction, concern on their faces. Many headed to the King rail docks, presumably towards Ho Man Ting. Keung felt uninformed and wanted for an update.

I wonder what the others are up to?

He limped back to his quarters in the royal palace of Yu Tower. His muscles felt like they hadn't woken up yet and his ribs were still slightly sore. Nested on the highest floors of the tower, the palace was a birthright to his noble lineage, the Yaozhi dynasty. Nearby were the bedrooms of General Denzhen, his cousins Prince Tsai and Princess Aisin, and the Emperor and Empress. These upper floors had been the Yaozhis' home for generations, with empty rooms in between reserved for the future children of Keung and Tsai.

Keung knocked on his father's bedroom door, but it was locked. So, he headed for his own room. Inside his personal bathroom, he undressed, pushed his clothes into the laundry chute and glanced at the rectangular mirror above the sink. Standing before it, he rotated his face and inspected his jaw, finding the length of his stubble acceptable. He gently prodded his face.

Wow, absolutely nothing. Not a single scar. A testament to uncle's Zhaisheng.

But this momentary marvel was dashed by the reality of his declining physique. He poked at his stomach, feeling the skin and fat. The separation between each muscle was fading. His abs, once sharply defined, now blurred into his stomach. His chest drooped and his underwear pinched his waist, forming slight fat handles. It was still a body many in Kowloon would envy, yet it was a reminder of Keung's departure from the rigorous physical standards of a Kingmaker. Ever since he had been assigned the task of hunting down Yang leaders, he barely had time to train at the dojo.

With a final glance at his reflection, Keung retreated to the shower.

Minutes passed as Keung relaxed amongst the blanketing mist of the shower. In the soothing rhythm of falling water, he nearly missed the faint vibrations echoing from the sink.

Bzzt. Bzzt. Bzzt.

It was his holocommunicator, or holo, buzzing. The tech adornment on the forearm of all Kingmakers, an advanced tool that elevated the District Yu gangsters above every other gang in Kowloon. This multipurpose gadget – a communicator, encryptor, computer, and super processor rolled into one – was the epitome of cutting-edge engineering.

Emerging from the shower, water droplets cascading off his skin, Keung answered his holocommunicator.

'Lieutenant Keung!' It was Captain Shen of the second cohort. Ushi and Tao graduated from his batch of centurions.

'Captain, it's good to hear from you. How are you?' Keung said.

'Lieutenant,' Shen said. 'As I've mentioned numerous times, you can address me as Shen. Your rank has outstripped mine for quite some time now.'

'Age, Captain, lends a wisdom that can't be outranked,' Keung replied. 'Your wisdom and experience will always be ahead of mine.'

'Your humility is a mirror of your father's, Lieutenant. I heard you were out of the infirmary. Have your injuries been patched up? Are you okay after what happened in Ji Sia?'

'I'm fine. Thank you, Captain. Can I help you with something?' Keung

queried.

'Yes… a visitor is asking for you. Not by name, but he's seeking the lead investigator on the Yang activity in Yau, which is you.'

'What's this visitor's name?'

'*Shizhou Han*. Said the Luen siblings sent him. He refuses to give any more information beyond that.'

'Han…' Keung echoed, brows furrowed. 'Doesn't ring a bell, Captain.'

'He says it will make more sense when he speaks to you privately.'

'Could you direct him to Cheng?'

'Cheng is still in the south with your father, assisting the Tien Tao Rioters with what just went down.'

Keung's eyes widened. 'Cheng and Ba were in Ho Man Ting?'

'The reports suggest your entire team was present. If I remember right, they were the first to respond.'

The sting of regret bit at Keung. *I should have been there with them.*

'I see. Thank you, Captain. Are you currently in the ground floor lobby?'

'Yes, sir. By the western elevators.'

Keung winced at the salutation by his former superior. Yet another reminder of the biting accusations of nepotism against him.

'Understood. I'll be there in ten minutes. In the meantime, please offer Han some cha.'

'Already ahead of you, Lieutenant. He's sipping on it as we speak. I'll expect you in ten.'

The holo call ended, and Keung set the device on the sink. He stepped back into the shower and finished rinsing off. Soon, he stood in the bathroom, water dripping down his legs. The warmth from the heaters relaxed him, but he saw on his holocommunicator that he had less than five minutes to meet the captain. He dried off, wrapped a towel around his waist, and returned to his bedroom. Opening his closet, he found his freshly laundered Kingmaker uniform hanging neatly inside, just as he had hoped.

He took it off the hanger, the whole set present, and laid it on his bed to wear. He dressed in a flash, wearing his faded-blue button-up shirt and jumping into his dark, baggy trousers. He fastened the bulletproof vest over

his shirt and slid his arms through the gold sleeves of his trench coat. With four button clicks, the leather coat was secure.

Keung found his red sash, a swath of silk that Kingmakers tied around their waist. He slipped into his dark, gothic boots, tightening the laces that ran all the way up to his shins.

Finally, he reached for his black peaked cap and fit it on his head.

Time to meet this Han.

Keung descended to the ground-floor lobby of the tower, passing a mural-covered wall featuring a striking spray-painted portrait of a young man. His head was tilted slightly upward, his eyes fixed on some unseen horizon, with an expression that radiated pride and defiance.

Keung noticed Captain Shen waiting by a set of couches, accompanied by someone who was clearly not a Kingmaker.

He offered a deep, respectful bow to the Captain, who returned the gesture in kind before pulling him into a warm embrace.

'Lieutenant, you just keep growing!' Captain Shen exclaimed.

'And you don't seem to age, Captain.'

Captain Shen laughed. It had been a full annui-cycle since their last face-to-face meeting, and six cycles since Keung's academy days, where he'd interacted daily with Shen, even though Captain Aiguo had been Keung's teacher.

Keung's gaze moved past Shen, settling on a man standing near a sleek black sofa.

'You must be Han?' Keung ventured.

Shen stepped aside and gestured for Han to step forward. Han and Keung bowed to each other and shook hands. Keung noted the strength in Han's grip – a firmness that spoke of military discipline.

'A pleasure to meet you, sir,' Han said, placing his other hand atop Keung's. 'My name is Shizhou Han; I am the commander of the Tai Li.'

Keung heard Shen's sharp intake of breath. He also couldn't help but feel a sudden surge of unease.

Why is the commander of the Tai Li asking for me?

'My my,' Captain Shen added. 'The Tai Li. Oh, have we heard about you!

Your achievements are legendary, but I had no idea you guys were still active?'

'You flatter me, sir,' Han said with a smile to the Captain. 'Yes, we are still active. But the Tai Li squad is an imitation of the Kingmakers at best. We based our training and standards on the Kings themselves. Our founder, Ying Luen, idolises the legendary warriors of District Yu.'

'Ying, eh? Yeah, we go back,' Captain Shen elbow-nudged Keung with a cheeky smile. 'We took part in a joint training drill back when I was a sergeant. She's a real piece of work; led the entire camp with an iron grip. But it's nice to hear she thinks so highly of these kids I've helped train in the tower.'

Ying Luen sent him? Keung still couldn't shake his apprehension. *Is this related to what happened to Jian?*

'Han, pardon my bluntness, but why did you request to see me?'

A frown flashed across Han's face. 'Captain Shen, would it be possible to speak with Yaozhi Keung in private?'

'Certainly. Perhaps you could take Han to your changing rooms, Lieutenant? I believe your team is on their way back to the tower. I gave them each a buzz to return.'

'Thank you, Captain. Do you have classes to run now?'

'In about an hour, yes. But before that, I've got a centurion to visit. You take care, Lieutenant.'

'You, too, sir. Come, Han, let's talk upstairs.'

Keung gave Shen one final bow, who returned the gesture and left.

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'Had a feeling I'd find you here.' Captain Shen's voice echoed through the quiet dojo.

Centurion Baoyan, seated on the floor and leaning over a low table, glanced up at the captain standing in the doorway. He jumped to his feet and bowed as Shen stepped inside.

'Just studying for an upcoming test, Captain.'

Leaving his boots by the door, Shen saw scattered textbooks in front of Baoyan and a portable computer that wasn't displaying academic Kingmaker

material. Instead, it showed the front page of the *Eastern Times* news site.

'Your mother never tell you reading in the dark is bad for your eyes? Let's brighten this place up a bit.' Shen strode over to the wall and turned the lights up, flooding the dojo with a warm glow.

Baoyan sighed. 'Honestly, I finished revising a while ago. I've just been working on personal projects and following some news from home.'

'Yeah, I noticed,' Shen said, nodding toward the dormant computer. 'By the way, that mural of yours has been causing a bit of a stir around the tower.'

'Really? Good or bad?'

'Oh, very positive. Some of my students have been asking who the figure is. At the very least, you've made sure a few more people know that new Lord's name. How are things back in Pik? Has the famine eased up?'

Baoyan took a deep breath. 'Once Mingchi's sworn in, he'll work on ending it. It'll mark the beginning of a long journey to rebuild Pik.'

'It's rare to see a Kingmaker from the east here. I don't think we've ever had more than five at any time. Quite unfortunate.'

Baoyan fell silent, his expression thoughtful. He turned back to the table, picking up a thick but mostly empty notebook. He flipped open to the first page.

'What's that?' Shen asked.

'I want to document Eastern history in an unprecedented way,' Baoyan explained. 'Illiteracy plagues the East, and most of the libraries holding Eastern knowledge were destroyed thousands of annui-cycles ago. Huge chunks of our history are missing. But I realised something. Us Kingmakers, we're the best record keepers in Kowloon, aren't we? The Yu Library has the most comprehensive information of Kowloon's history. It may not have much on eastern history, but it definitely holds more records of our past than anywhere else. So I thought, why not reclaim this knowledge from the tower and create the first-ever eastern history book, using our Kingmaker resources? A perspective of history written by an easterner, for easterners.'

Shen's eyes lit up. 'I can't think of a better idea, Baoyan! Come on, read something you've written. I'm eager to hear it.'

The young centurion smiled, cleared his throat, and began reading aloud.

'King in the East, by Wong Baoyan. The eastern region of Kowloon was not always defined by poverty, disease, overpopulation, and famine. Long before the birth of the prophet Dong, Kowloon was divided into three great regions: west, east, and south. The east served as the administrative heart of the nation, the seat of law and bureaucracy. It was where the Dynasty's throne sat. The west was its industrial and economic engine, exporting its products and gaining capital. The south, by contrast, was ever fractured and locked in ceaseless tribal conflicts and downward conquests into the uncharted realms of Kowloon.'

'Ah, so that's how the Huang Wildlands came to be,' Shen commented.

'During Kowloon's formative era, not too long after *The Great Sinking,* every region was united by the *Unification Pact,* which decreed unwavering loyalty to the Yaozhi's. Regional disputes, even wars, would be tolerated, but loyalty to the Dynasty was a must. In the centuries that followed, East Kowloon entered a golden age, its citizens living prosperous lives. Yet, as eastern prosperity flourished, so did western jealousy and resentment. Free-market industrialists from the Western Reaches, unable to match the efficiency of the East's centralised economy, began conspiring behind closed doors.'

Shen's eyes narrowed as Baoyan turned the page and cleared his throat.

'Under the guise of bilateral economic assistance, the west launched two major colonial projects. The first was the formation of Central Kowloon, carved out of the East and rebranded as a neutral seat and region for the Dynasty. They convinced the emperor that he needed a throne separate from the three great regions of the city. Kowloonis from the west moved into these eastern regions en masse and displaced many of its inhabitants, pushing them further east.

Then was their second project: the creation of North Kowloon, cut out from the East's northern provinces and transformed into an enclave of Western wealth. It was designed to be a glittering haven of low taxes, gleaming groundscrapers, and virtually no poverty. The status quo for wealth and power was about to be toppled. And the eastern Kowloonis that

were already living there were forcibly sent deeper into East Kowloon.'

Captain Shen pursed his lips.

'As this new order of the underground world entrenched itself, Eastern Lords and Ladies demanded a return of their former territories. They were denied multiple times. So when whispers of a new East-South alliance reached district Yu, the one thing that could threaten the Unification Pact, the Emperor responded with brutality. East Kowloon was belted with regicide after regicide, soon succumbing to a new generation of Northern aristocrats who ruled over them for 300 annui-cycles. These foreign Lords siphoned its resources, stripped its military might, and reversed centuries of technological advances. Pride in culture was smashed, and so was their will to resist. A thousand-annui-cycle decline and humiliation began.'

Baoyan briefly looked at Shen's eyes, hoping for a comment. But the captain was quiet, frowning, and listening.

'The final blow came only 27 annui-cycles ago from writing, during the District Rebellions of 1255 A.T. 632. South Kowloon, with their unrelenting unity and resilience, declared open war against the Yaozhi dynasty. But the east became unwilling players in the war, and they could not muster the same resilience as their southern cousins. Not even the central battleground, it bore the heaviest number of casualties that have left deep scars on its identity.

Today, the East's status as the cradle of the Yaozhi dynasty is contested by historians. Despite overwhelming evidence that much of Central and North Kowloon was once eastern, official narratives deny it. The erasure is not accidental.

For many, the reason is plain: to be an Easterner in Kowloon is to be something less. The slur 'dongfa'shu' reminds us that to them, Easterners are closer related to their local rodents than their Kowlooni neighbour. Whatever the truth may be, the East has been starved of many things: food, wealth, autonomy, recognition, and even the proof of its own legacy.'

Baoyan's voice softened. 'This is the heartbreak of Eastern Kowloon.'

Shen stood in silence, lips pursed as if weighing his thoughts. Anticipation tightened in Baoyan's chest as he waited for the captain to comment on the

introduction to his history book. But all Shen could manage was an uneasy smile, the kind that hovered between approval and hesitation.

****

Keung and Han entered a room filled with rows of lockers and took a seat on a long bench in the centre. The lockers, some filled with weapons, explosives, gadgets, and spare uniforms, were assigned to Keung's team members. Most others were empty. Keung had always thought the room was too big for his small six-man detachment.

'So, what brings you here, Han?'

'General Denzhen, your father if I am not mistaken, has permitted us to take part in your investigations of Yang activities in District Yau.'

'That's impossible. The general would never… All high-level Kingmaker operations are strictly Kingmaker business.'

'The decision came after a meeting with Lok and Ying Luen,' Han explained calmly. 'You're welcome to confirm my story with General Denzhen, sir.'

A wave of confusion hit Keung before he recalled Denzhen speaking of a meeting with the siblings while he was still in the infirmary.

Is Ba serious about outsiders helping me? Does he think I'm too incompetent to handle things on my own? Have both my father and the Luen siblings labelled me a failure?

He shook his head, dismissing the thought. 'I trust what you're saying, Han. Regardless of General Denzhen's reasons, I'll honour his judgement.'

Han gave a satisfied grin. 'Excellent. Where do we start?'

The door slid open, and Keung turned around to see Ushi bickering with another man who had long hair, a wispy moustache and wore plain clothes.

'Get a load of this guy, sir!' Ushi said spotting his superior. 'Says he's joining our team!'

'I sure am!' the stranger interjected, turning to Han. 'There he is. Han, sir, tell him!'

'Lieutenant,' Han said, 'this is Kan Jin, my co-captain. Jin, this is Lieutenant Keung, the leader of the investigation into the Yangs, son of the Dragon General Denzhen, and the fourth heir to the Yaozhi dynasty. Starting today,

we report to him.'

Keung hadn't expected such a dramatic introduction. Simultaneously, Jin's jaw dropped at seeing the lead for their investigation; the same man who was at the centre of the recent Jian controversy.

'No way, Lieutenant, what's he on about?' Ushi demanded.

Jin bowed shallowly to Keung. Still feeling a bit unsure, he returned the gesture with a snap bow.

Ushi stared at the gestures with disgust.

'I take it you and Ushi got to know each other on the way here?' Keung said, his mind racing to take command of the situation.

Ushi shook his head frustratedly. 'Wait, no, what's going on? Who are these people?'

The door once again slid open. This time it was Cheng and Tao, both with dark circles under their eyes. Energy residue covered Cheng's face, which was normal after being around prolonged gunfire. Tao had his trench coat tied unbuttoned, and his shirt's top two buttons undone and untucked out of the red sash around his waist. It was clear the two had just returned from the events in Ho Man Ting last night.

'We could hear you screaming from the bottom floor,' Tao groaned.

'Tao!' Ushi called out. 'Get this, these two nobodies want to join our investigation into the Yangs!'

Tao barely grunted in response. 'Yeah, cool.'

He flopped onto the bench. 'Too tired to care right now.'

However, Cheng's eyes widened and he jerked his head back. 'Say that again, Ushi,' he sputtered.

'You heard him,' Jin snapped back. 'We nobodies are on your team now. Like it or not.'

The room exploded into a cacophony of voices. Jin, like a dusk-cat in a rodent farm, was trying to shout down Cheng and Ushi, defending his presence.

'And who the hell are you again?' Ushi demanded.

'Go ask ya boss, jackass!'

'Ushi!' Keung shouted, 'Just let me explain—'

'Yeah, let him explain,' Jin parroted.

'Now, you listen here,' Cheng thrust a finger at Jin.

'You the boss? No?' Jin squared his shoulders as he stared back at Cheng.

Meanwhile, Han stood silent in the sea of chaos. Keung could feel a throbbing headache building, grateful that Yutai and Shing were absent. They were two hurricanes he didn't need right now.

The door slid open and Shing and Yutai stepped into the room, halting at the sight of the ongoing battle. Undeterred by their lack of context of the uproar, the two entered headfirst into the shouting match.

Keung sighed.

'WHAT?!' two voices shouted in unison.

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Amidst the madness, Cheng's attention was drawn to the quiet figure of Han trying to dissuade Jin from starting a 1 v 4 brawl.

Something rang very familiar about Han. Cheng studied his face, taking in the martial discipline evident in his lean build, the casual clothes that bore no affiliation to any known gangs. Nothing to indicate a Ji Sia neck tattoo, a San Po severed pinkie, or a *Kam Shan* black jacket. Just a nondescript shirt and trousers. Basic sneakers and no jewellery, as you would expect from the common Kowlooni. But his face… there was something about those intense eyes, the strong jawline, and that near-perfect hairline that was ringing a bell in Cheng's mind. Two ordinary men, yet so distinctive, here on a high-ranking Kingmaker order to join their operations. Then realisation hit Cheng like a bolt of lightning.

'Are you Hashin Lihao? Hold on,' Cheng tapped his chin in contemplation and pointed to Jin. 'That must mean you are Ranjin Puyahu.' The voices in the room stilled as though Cheng had thrown a switch. All eyes swivelled towards him, confusion painted on every face, except Keung's.

Hashin and Ranjin stiffened as Cheng uttered their long-dead names, names that had crossed no one's lips in ages except Ying's. A guarded wariness crept into their expressions.

Cheng's follow-up question cornered the two men, leaving no room for squeal. 'If I may ask, what are two dead men doing here in Yu?'

It made sense to Cheng before they even answered. He recalled his time at the Kingmaker Propagation Offices, where the Kings drove recruitment. They had reached out to two exceptional Ji Sia gangsters from Yau, Lihao Hashin and Puyahu Ranjin, impressed by a recent assignment they completed for the Luen siblings. When the Kingmakers sent their official invitation, Ying Luen intercepted it. She explained to General Qin Shi that she was forming Yau's first special operations team and had already given the two men a choice: join the Kingmakers or lead the new spec-ops project to protect Yau. To the general's surprise, they chose the latter.

To confirm his theory, Cheng honed in on the sides of their necks. Every new Ji Sia gangster received a tattoo of the Luen insignia on the side of their neck. Everyone knew this. Sure enough, both had a small, pinkish-white patch – a removed tattoo.

A chuckle rumbled from Han's chest, the sound echoing in the sudden quiet. 'This one's bright, Lieutenant Keung.'

'So,' Cheng murmured, his voice icy with suspicion, 'Two dead men with covered-up Ji Sia tattoos asking to join us in hunting down Yang members. Tell me, *Han*, the Tai Li were never really disbanded, were they?'

Ushi, Tao, Yutai, and the ever-combative Shing just stared.

'Tribune Cheng, isn't it?' Han asked coldly. 'How'd you know?'

'I used to take shifts at the recruiting office. In an entire generation, you could count on two hands how many people turned down a Kingmaker letter of interest. Whenever that happened, I made it my business to find out why.'

'You're especially astute, sir,' Han said. 'You were on the Ho Man Ting rooftop last night with the genera, weren't you?' He gestured at the still dumbstruck Kingmakers. 'We were there too. Not up there on the rooftops with you high-flyers, but among the crowd below. All eight of us Tai Li. We knew the mob would gather there long before it happened, but seeing the Ibilis threw a wedge in our plans. Otherwise, we'd have been in that very room with *you*, ' Han's finger zeroed in on Yutai, who wore a matching frown to Cheng's, 'waiting for *the Ibilis.*'

If the Tai Li were aware of this much, Cheng thought, *we've got to keep a closer*

eye on them.

'How did you know?' Yutai asked Han.

'What? What are you guys talking about?' Keung asked.

Jin broke in, his voice sharp with derision. 'Judging by your faces, it's clear you guys had no idea the Yangs were staging that appearance.' He tsked and shook his head. 'Han, let's just go. I don't think they're as useful as you thought they'd be.'

Shing visibly bristled at Jin's words. 'For all your talk, I don't remember seeing you do shit last night. Were you enjoying Mogwei's little show with the rest of the crowd? Really living up to your names as dead soldiers!'

Jin's eyes narrowed to slits and he stomped towards Shing, who stood his ground, smirking. Keung and Han intervened, stepping between the two and holding Jin back. Jin snapped at Shing, his voice a dangerous hiss. 'Why don't you say that shit to my face, asshole?'

Shing took a step forward as Tao and Yutai grabbed his shoulders. 'You'd just go crying back to Lok and that other Luen bitch!'

'ENOUGH!' The word erupted from Cheng like a clap of thunder, silencing the room instantly. He stepped between the two men, his gaze as lethal as a sword tip. 'Shing, one more peep from you and I'll personally throw you into the lightforsaken clutches of No Man's Land myself!'

Shing sneered and yanked his shoulders away from Tao and Yutai's hands, settling back. At the same time, Keung and Han let go of Jin, who shot a scathing look over his shoulder before straightening his rumpled collar with a huff.

Cheng turned to Keung, his stern gaze softening just a touch. 'Sir, can you confirm Han's claim? Will we be working alongside the Tai Li in our investigations?' he asked, wanting to put this to rest.

Keung nodded with a straight face.

'All right, that settles it. If any of you have any more complaints, take it up with General Denzhen.' Cheng signalled to Keung. 'Sir, the room is yours.'

'Thank you. Okay, first things first. We have a lot to discuss. The Ibilis appeared in Ho Man Ting Square last night. I want to hear everyone's perspective.'

Keung gestured towards the bench in the middle for everyone to take a seat. From left to right sat Jin, Han, Tao, Ushi, Cheng, Yutai, and Shing at the other end.

'I'll go first,' Cheng began. 'General Denzhen received a call from the Tien Tao Riot Squad after a protest in the square was showing signs of Yang presence. Men and women in dark clothing and shadowed eyes, some carrying Yang flags. On such short notice, he thought to call me first since you were still in recovery. I summoned everyone I could, and by the time we all gathered in Man Ting…'

11

Beyond the Banner

Last night in Kowloon's South, Cheng stood shoulder to shoulder with his brethren-in-arms on the rooftop of the Ho Man Ting Mall, his breath forming clouds of condensation in the crisp night air. Each moment prickled with a tension that somehow felt new, despite the habitual chaos of Kowloon's south.

He knew he couldn't draw from any past experiences to aid him now. This wouldn't be a random skirmish in the alleys, or just another instance of violence reverberating through the concrete veins of Kowloon. The Yau bombings had changed everything, and now he saw every encounter with the Yang as a loaded gun hanging over the city's innocent populace. He clenched his fists, ready to do whatever he could to protect them all.

As Cheng stood there, staring at the thousands of heads awaiting in anticipation, his focus was broken by the sound of Shing's brisk voice. Cheng turned back, hearing General Denzhen give the praefect orders in a hushed whisper.

'... Yes, General. Right away,' Cheng heard. Shing turned and jogged over to him. As he approached, he offered a bow.

'Good work getting here swiftly, Praefect,' Cheng said. 'I don't see Yutai. Where is he?'

'About that, sir. We were in Kam Shan doing something urgent for Tong Feng. We couldn't abandon the task for the night. He sends his apologies;

he'll wrap up and get here as soon as he can.'

Cheng shook his head. *I gave Yutai an order.* 'Fine, we'll discuss this later. Get into position. I have a feeling things are going to kick off soon.'

Shing walked to Cheng's right and removed his rifle off his back. He pulled out it's pronged stand below the barrel and slowly laid himself prone against the gritty rooftop. With his PAW12 perched on the rooftops edge, he placed his eye in the scope and began scanning the crowd. Cheng stood up high above the anxious crowds, hoping Yutai would get here before trouble started.

****

As the King rail announced its arrival in Ho Man Ting City, Yutai dashed out, his footsteps echoing through the dark, silent Yau embassy. Exiting the building, he locked the door behind him and was met with a massive crowd surging towards Ho Man Ting Square. Joining the human tide, he navigated the dense sea of people, overhearing whispers of *'Is that a Kingmaker?'*

Despite the collective body heat making him sweat under his leather trench coat, Yutai pressed on, eyes fixed on the glowing blue display of his holo-map. When the 18/5th corridor appeared, he broke free from the crowd and bolted through a metal gate into a dark alley that was shortcut to his destination. Thunderous roars echoed from the square, increasing the tension with every step. *I need to get to the signal before the caller leaves!*

He darted through small alleyways until he found an archway that led towards Ho Man Ting University. Light rain and chilly winds hit Yutai as the alleys gave way to an open overhead space. He approached the backside of the looming brutalist structure, away from the ongoing main spectacle. The roar of the crowd rose from the opposite side of the university building, and he was stunned by the scope of the event.

Yutai charged up a short ramp towards the back doors of the university, only to find them locked. A twitch of anger surged through him, and he kicked the door in frustration. He walked backwards some distance, taking in the rear of the building as his eyes scanned for a point of entry. *The signal is coming from the 13th floor.*

Yutai caught sight of a small scaffold on the fourth floor's broad landing,

with a window at its top.

An entrance, perhaps?

With renewed energy, he took several steps back and leapt onto the small awning jutting above the locked door. Hoisting himself up, he scrambled up windowsills and cracks in the greyed, damp plaster, reaching for anything he could leverage to climb higher. Even under the drizzle, the grip of his boot remained steadfast against the wet surface.

I hope Shing is doing okay.

****

'Hold fire!' General Denzhen ordered, standing at the rear of all the men.

Shing's finger twitched above the trigger of his formidable PAW12, wrestling with the urge to pull the trigger. His right eye was engulfed by the scope, trained on the silent silhouette of a man known as Mogwei to the Yang, and the Ibilis to everyone else. He stood, a microphone in hand, waiting high up on the ledge of HMTU.

A granite statue of a man with an unyielding gaze, Denzhen was shouting orders to the six other Kingmakers and the two units of the Nanfang gangsters, making 26 individuals on the rooftop altogether.

Beyond the lip of the rooftop below them, the square was packed with thousands of people, gathered under the glow of lights spilling from the gargantuan groundscrapers flanking the square. Their collective murmurs and chatter vibrated through the concrete, a monotonous drone of rebellion fuelled by generations of outrage and alienation.

'I think most here are Yang sympathisers,' Cheng said as he eyed the crowd. The comment fell on deaf ears, Shing was consumed by the spectacle unfolding across the square at Ho Man Ting University.

'How long?!' Shing heard General Denzhen bark into his holocommunicator behind them. 'No, Mr Enji, your men need to get there, NOW! What do you mean there's been a hold-up at the fort? Then tell them to hurry up!'

The general growled as he hung up the line. Shing had heard of Mr Enji. He was the district coordinator for Ho Man Ting's special operative force: The Tien Tao Riot Squad.

The air felt heavy, dense with anticipation and foreboding, flecks of rain

sprinkling past Shing's magnified scope as he stared at the Ibilis. Suddenly, the elusive figure raised his hands, a simple gesture that wielded the power to silence thousands. Shing watched as the figure began to speak, his voice amplified across the square, bouncing off the steel and concrete of their southern underground city.

'**Children of Kowloon, my warriors of the South,**' the Ibilis began. '**No longer shall we remain bound to the chains of bondage! For too long, they have marginalised us, pushing us to the fringes of society, and silenced our voices. Today, I stand before you to reignite the hope that flickers within the South...**

****

... They fear us because they know we hold the power. We are the backbone of this world. We toil in the mines, we run their machines, we leave our homes and families to build their towers of concrete and steel throughout Kowloon. And still, they overlook us, disregard us, and treat us as less than the dirt they tread upon. Operation Searchlight provided proof of their actions, when they violently deported our innocent brothers and sisters in District Yau with no proof or due process. They marched them south, through hundreds of kilometres of suffocating alleys. Our children left dead in gutters along the way, the Light awaiting them to this *DAY!*'

His vengeful voice thundered from the square, from the other side of the university building. The escalating roars that followed dangerously raised Yutai pulse. He stood on a scaffold cluttered with paint cans and rollers just outside a closed window on the fourth floor. He attempted to hoist the window, but it was locked.

Damn it!

Cursing under his breath, he withdrew his hand cannon from beneath his trench coat, shattering the window with a single, silenced shot drowned out by the noise from the crowd. After kicking out the remaining shards, he unlatched the window from the inside and hoisted himself indoors, the crunch of shattered glass beneath his boots welcoming his intrusion into the dark hallways of the university.

Now he had a new predicament: *left or right?* Opting for the right, he sprinted down the winding hallway, his eyes scanning for an elevator amidst the closed doors and windows. The soft sounds of rain hitting the windows accompanied his dash down the hallways, shadows of the streaks of water slithering down the left walls. Yutai saw a sign pointing towards the fire escape. He ran in that direction and found an open door to a staircase – an emergency exit with no railings, its grey walls promising a quick ascent. He rushed up the stairs, mentally ticking off the levels as he ran.

7... 8... 9...

Dashing two steps at a time, he heard the Ibilis' voice reverberate through the university walls and echo up and down the fire escape.

'Our cousins in the north, the core, the west, they live a life we can only dream of. Well-lit homes, abundant food, warm clothes on their backs, while we've been fighting over scraps for generations. Is this justice? Is this equality? Is this how we treat the people of Dong's birthplace? As we watch our eastern brethren starve on our doorstep, we see our shared oppressor locking their door, leaving them to their slow deaths. Those very brethren who laid their lives to defend us during the bloody rebellions. We watch the dynasty scoff at our demands for fairer treatment, laugh at us when we demanded our imprisoned siblings back from their foreign prisons...'

****

... and then they have the audacity to act surprised when we resist!' The Ibilis raised an open palm and placed it over his chest. **'A new flame burns blue in the heart of the south. A flame that the winds of their neglect and apathy cannot extinguish, but fan to intensities untold. That flame is the spirit of the Yang – the spirit of resistance and the manifestation of Dong's final calling. We are the successors of his mission, the chosen of the Light!'**

'Sir?' Shing shouted through the din to General Denzhen. 'I can put an end to this right now!' His glass scope was fixed on the Ibilis' left knee. If he fired now, it would rip the madman's leg into two pieces.

'No, not yet. This is the first time they're stating their demands publicly.

Even *they* deserve to say their piece.'

'Why the fuck are we letting them do this?' Shing muttered under his breath.

The Ibilis continued, quieter, more sombre. **'That is why I appear before you with a heavy heart. All of you know how hard we have tried… with our lives no less. But the painful reality is that, from Shenzhen to Nam Bato, the streets are filled with desperation and grief. The East starves. The West may not know it, but they are on the brink of divine punishment. In the Huang Wildlands, the blood of our starved brethren stains the floors of every building red, from the ground to the peaks of the 100th levels…**

****

… Today, the people of Kowloon want freedom, the people of Kowloon want to survive, and the people of Zhongguo want to have their right to a dignified life! The Yaozhi's Mandate of Heaven has been smashed, and all can see it!'

Upon reaching the 13th floor, the sprawling labyrinth of hallways stretched before Yutai, blanketed in a foreboding stillness. From this floor, only the echoes of the Ibilis' voice reached him, the crowds a lot more distant. He quickly snatched at every knob, hoping one would be unlocked. He crossed windows, still fighting against the patter of rain, hoping his target hadn't escaped.

Yutai turned a corner and noticed a door ajar in the distance. He approached it slowly, with the Ibilis's amplified voice as the foreboding backdrop to his advance.

Cautiously, Yutai slid out his RS6 hand cannon from its holster with one hand, then nudged the door open with the other. He aimed the gun inside, panning left and right in tandem with his racing heartbeat, scanning the vast darkness that swallowed the room. He was in a chemical laboratory. A spectral crimson glow spilled through a wide window at the far end of the lab, bathing the furniture and walls in an eerie red wash that almost seemed to drip down their surfaces. Yutai realised the colour came from a length of red fabric draped over the window outside, fluttering in the wind and muting the harsh lights beyond. Right now, where was the caller?

Could it have been...

'Our THIRD demand, AND OUR FINAL AND MOST IMPORTANT ORDER...

****

... Puyin and the Kingmakers' unconditional surrender of the Ditu over to the people of Kowloon, for true freedom will only come once we depart from the chains of the underground! By his word, the Prophet Dong has promised you!'

'That's enough,' General Denzhen hissed, arms crossed, hearing the cheers and roars of the crowd. 'Take your shot, Shing.'

'Kill or—' Shing began.

'Kill.' The General's voice was icy cold.

The time for listening had ended.

In an instant, Shing's aimed his scope to the Ibilis's forehead and his finger pulled the trigger. Barking a single deadly shot, the deafening echo reverberated off the buildings and tore through the open space above the square, the air spiralling around the metal round, the dull glow of the tracer striking the centre of the mask.

****

As Yutai stepped into the dark lab, the rip of a single rifle shot from the square outside stilled the air around him. A sound he recognised all too well – Shing's *PAW12.* He hesitated briefly, his foot poised in mid-air before taking another step into the room.

'Brothers and sisters, they mean to silence me! This isn't over; do not let our dreams perish!'

Suddenly, a barrage of gunshots unleashed from the outside, with what felt like a hundred guns letting loose. The relentless firing battered against the building, causing the room to shudder. The voice from the outside echoed, the crowd's roar intensifying into pandemonium. Amid the gunfire and frenzied shouts, Yutai's gut forced his gaze onto the obscured window, his brows knitted in expectation. A hunch gnawed at him, the hairs on his arms rising as if he were standing on the precipice of something momentous…

CRASH!!

A sudden fury of movement and shattering glass erupted around Yutai, the deafening crack of a splintering window slicing through the air past him. He raised his arms to protect his face from the sharp shards, the lab now howling with wind and pulsating lights from the square.

As his mind surged into overdrive, a masked, robed figure materialised through the window. A punch, swift as a silent spear, surged towards Yutai's head. With a sharp snap of his arms, Yutai blocked it and countered with a combination of powerful jabs and swings; all which the the figure ducked and weaved around. Yutai's strikes spoke of an intention to cause serious bodily harm… but when the masked man punched back, it whispered the intention of murder.

Shoving the man back, Yutai vaulted off a lab bench on his right and rocked him with a spinning tornado kick. Yutai's officer's cap flew off in the flurry, but the masked man barely wobbled, firing back a barrage of rapid jabs. Yutai, graceful as a shadow, danced away, just out of reach.

Capitalising on a brief opening, Yutai grabbed both the man's arms, yanked him closer, and smashed the masked face with a powerful headbutt.

Shockwaves reverberated through his skull as he realised the 'mask' was more a helmet than a piece of vanity. Both of them stumbled back from the headbutt, but Yutai forced his own pain and nausea aside as he lunged forward, aiming to grapple him to the floor. Instead, he received an iron-hard uppercut to his chin.

His consciousness flickered as he stumbled backwards. As the masked man shuffled forward, bobbing through the air like a boxer, Yutai grabbed his hand cannon and swung it towards the man's head – the man swiped it to the side – *BANG!*

The right wall exploded into fragments and splinters across their faces.

The man grabbed Yutai's gun arm, seizing the wrist and striking the elbow. The gun fell out of his palms, but then Yutai's two fingers dove straight into the eyeholes of the mask and he yanked it back.

Fuck, I can almost see him!

With a startled grunt, the man released Yutai's arm and scrambled to secure his mask – but Yutai wasn't about to let him. Seizing the sides of the mask

with both hands, Yutai drove a powerful kick into the man's midsection, determined to rip it off once and for all. But the masked figure clinched tightly around Yutai's torso, slammed a knee into his groin, and hurled him onto a lab bench cluttered with computers.

Spitting blood, Yutai sprang to his feet with a swift kip-up, but his opponent was already atop the bench, fists and legs a blur of martial arts prowess. Bone clashed against bone as kicks and punches snapped through the air, their exchanges turning into a desperate slugfest.

****

'He's gone!' voices murmured from around the rooftop, incredulous.

'Rioters, storm the building! Leave no corner unseen! I want that Ibilis in Xhiku links before the hour!' the general barked into his holocommunicator.

'Shing, do you have a visual?' Cheng called. Shing's scope scanned the rip in the banner, through which he could see a shattered window. As he fixed his sight through the dark hole…

'What in the name of the Light?'

'What do you see, Shing?!' Cheng demanded.

'I have a visual of the Ibilis inside the room… but there's another person inside, and I can't tell what they're doing.'

'General!' Cheng shouted to the back.

'What is it, Cheng?'

'We have confirmation that the Ibilis is inside that room!' Cheng pointed to the shattered window behind the torn banner. 'But there's another unidentified person inside. What are your orders?'

The general nodded and contacted the Rioters storming the university building.

'Mr Enji? Have any of your rioters reached the Ibilis? All right, understood.'

The general raised his arm in the air. 'Men! Take aim at that window!'

****

Despite his adept defence, Yutai found himself retreating inch by inch; the masked man assault was relentless. The martial arts style was something he'd never encountered as his adversary seemed to predict every one of his

moves.

Beakers shattered, circuits flew, and lab materials transformed into weapons swung around the lab, discarded as quickly they were used. They leapt from bench to bench as the brutality continued. Yutai glanced at his hand cannon on the floor near the door.

The brief distraction a mistake – his assailant deftly manoeuvred around Yutai, leaping onto his shoulder and yanking his left arm straight. Yutai lost his footing and they both crashed to the floor, his arm now trapped between the masked man's crisscrossed legs in a tight armbar. He pulled it back, subjecting Yutai's arm to untold pain.

Locked in his assailant's vice-like grip, Yutai could feel his elbow creak under the strain. He scrabbled at the floor with his right hand, spotting a fallen broomstick about a meter away. But when he reached for the thick white strands of the mop head, the masked man yanked his arm even harder, causing Yutai to shriek.

He felt his elbow hyperextend and about to pop out, but with one final heave, dragging the masked man's body with him, Yutai grabbed a single strand of the mop, seized its long handle, spun it around and thrust it into an eye hole of the mask.

The man let out a yell, and suddenly the crippling hold was broken. Adrenaline shot Yutai back to his feet as he shook off the searing pain in his arm, while the masked man scrambled to his feet, and covered the mask's left eye hole with his hand.

Yutai was laser-focused on his adversary. *I better have taken that bastard's eye!*

He felt something pour out his nose and he wiped it with his sleeve, noticing a streak of red against the black leather. His assailant looked at the hand that was covering his eye and rubbed his palm against red robes.

The two stood there, a tense stand-off punctuating the whirling chaos that had lasted mere minutes since the window shattered in Yutai's face. Now was the moment to end it. Both Yutai and the robed figure raised their fists to their chin. Each braced for the deathly round to restart.

Suddenly, the room erupted in a furious storm of bullets coming through

the window.

BANG BANG BANG BANG BANG BANG

Without a second thought, Yutai slid across the floor behind a nearby bench. The masked assailant mirrored his actions and ducked behind a second bench just a meter away from Yutai, divided by a curtain of gunfire. Yutai noticed the man's eerie calmness through the deafening sounds.

The bullets flew into the back wall of the room and the floor; computers blew up, glass closets shattered, and everything in the room slowly disintegrated. Yutai knew if he peeked out for even a second, he would lose his head. He looked at the cover where the masked man had been… but he was gone. The door slammed open, and Yutai caught a glimpse of the man's red robes as he ran off. He'd escaped, but the firing had not stopped. Yutai, knowing Cheng was with the other gangsters firing into the room, called him from his holocommunicator.

As Cheng answered, Yutai could hear the echo of gunfire on his end too.

'STOP FIRING! I'M IN THE ROOM!' Yutai yelled over the chaos. 'I'M IN THE FUCKING ROOM!'

The confusion in Cheng's voice was palpable. 'YUTAI? YOU'RE *WHERE?!*'

There was a brief pause, and then Yutai heard Cheng's distant voice order, 'CEASE FIRE! WE HAVE A KINGMAKER INSIDE!

****

'YUTAI IS INSIDE!' Cheng roared across the rooftop, waving his arms like a madman to signal the cease-fire, but his voice couldn't overpower the deafening sounds of the firing squad. General Denzhen was the only one who registered Cheng's panicked pleas, his eyes widening with horror. He yelled even louder, flailing his arms to catch the attention of everyone as he echoed Cheng's command.

'CEASE FIRE! I REPEAT, CEASE FIRE!'

The gunfire dwindled and then stopped, replaced by distant cries from the panicked crowd below. Shing felt his heart rise up through his throat, about to be vomited out his mouth.

What did he just say? Yutai's inside!?

Shing gaped at Cheng and shot him a horrified, wide-eyed expression.

Cheng returned the same expression, his face bloodless as he raised his wrist to try and reach Yutai's communicator. Shing quickly turned back to his scope, scanning what he could through the hole in the wall where the window was, looking for any signs of Yutai. As the room looked still, Shing began to pray out loud.

'O Light, I humbly plead, O Light, I humbly plead, O Light, I humbly plead, O Light, I humbly plead, spare my brother!'

When Yutai's head popped out of cover from behind a lab bench, a rush of relief washed over Shing, so potent that he almost dropped his rifle.

As the dust began to settle, Yutai approached the decimated wall and looked out at the Kingmakers and Rioters across the square. Shing scanned Yutai's body for signs of bullet injuries. Apart from bruises and lacerations to his face, he looked to be in one piece. However, his dull gaze and ponderous movements were sobering.

Sensing movement, Shing glanced up at Cheng to his right. The young tribune stood tall on the ledge of the mall, a silhouette of unwavering resolve against the dead, black sky. This sight of the tribune, standing with his chest out and eyes blazing with determination, filled Shing with newfound resolve. One thing was clear: South Kowloon was ready for a fight. And the Kingmakers were ready to give them one.

12

The Surface

Gently placing the empty cup back on its shelf, Yutai hoisted the straps of his rifle over his shoulder. It nestled into place, comfortable and familiar against his back. The cooling vents were on full blast, just as his parents liked it while they slept.

Yutai crept out of the refreshment room and down the silent corridor. He felt guilty about his short time at his family's home, barely a night's stay. But it had become the norm for him.

On the left was his parents' bedroom. His fingers brushed over the sleek control panel beside the door, expecting it to slide open with a familiar hiss. Instead, it flashed red. Locked.

Neither of his parents was awake. *No goodbyes this time.*

Pressing his ear against the cool surface of the door, Yutai heard the low rumble of his father's snores. A small smile tugged at his lips as he continued his journey down the dim corridor.

The living space was next – an area filled with entertainment screens and plush sofas, currently steeped in darkness. He moved through it with practised ease, careful not to disturb the furniture. The front door was just ahead, but there was one more room he wanted to check before he left for the tower. He tapped on a little panel by a door to his right, and it slid open with a whisper. Warmed air spilt out, caressing his face with a comforting heat that was a welcome respite from the chilled air his parents favoured.

Pangfua had the heater turned on overnight in his room. He lay cocooned in a blanket, emitting soft snores.

Yutai offered a silent prayer, a plea for the Light to protect his brother before he closed the door once more.

Turning his attention to the front door, he opened it and stepped outside. The satisfying buzz of the locks engaging behind him echoed in the early hours of the coming work-cycle.

Yutai usually stayed in his own home in the Kingmaker tower, but he still recalled the route from his academy days, when he had lived in the quiet suburbs of Yu with his family.

As he trekked toward the towering silhouette of Yu Tower, always present above the tops of Yu's short groundscrapers, the narrow, pristine streets of the fourth level stretched before him. Intricately designed window frames adorned the smooth sandstone walls of the streets at regular three-metre intervals. Between every third or fourth window was a sliding door that led to apartment units, where most residents were still sleeping in the early hours of the work-cycle.

The day lamps on the left wall of the street flickered to life, their soft glow signalling the end of the sleep cycle and the start of a new day. The inner-west end of District Yu was home to most of its citizens, families of respectable wealth and status. Unlike the wealthy families of the northern districts, these citizens had generational ties to the Emperor's royal family. If they didn't have a son or daughter currently serving as a Kingmaker, someone in their family once did. Even after their Kingmaker connection died or retired, these families could remain in Yu indefinitely.

Reaching a fork in the corridor, Yutai walked right and ventured into the heart of Yu's financial district. The corridor gradually broadened and the ceiling rose and arched into multi-levelled sides, revealing a plaza where people walked back and forth. Offices and corporate buildings lined the corridor, interspersed with a variety of shops yet to open. The smooth sandstone underfoot gave way to grey-tiled cement slabs. The atmosphere around him was slow and tranquil, with early risers preparing for the cycle's business in the heart of the district's commercial sector.

Yutai moved unnoticed through the sparse crowds of yawning Yu residents. For a Kingmaker, this anonymity was a rare luxury, but in District Yu, it was the norm.

Here, Kingmakers garnered little attention, as many citizens had immediate relatives within their ranks. This personal connection demystified their status. However, outside of Yu, encountering a Kingmaker was a rare and extraordinary experience. Most Kowloonis lived and died only hearing legends of the golden-striped Kings. They were not just seen as skilled enforcers capable of shifting entire political landscapes with their unique talents, but also as wealthy, eccentric playboys. Whether it was making appearances as team sponsors in high stakes zuche games, or dominating tables with smug confidence on the top floor of the Mazu City Star Casino. They were the living, breathing essence of Kowloon's legends and myths, as ancient as the city itself.

Yutai fought back a yawn as he journeyed towards the tower. His sleep was stolen by something major. For the first time in his Kingmaker career, he received a summons from the Emperor himself. He was certain it had to do with his involvement in the events of two nights ago, when he'd had an unexpected showdown against the Ibilis.

If that's the case, the rest of the detachment must be on their way, too.

A mild headache pulsed in sync with the fight flashing back in his mind. His left arm still ached from when the Ibilis had almost snapped it in half. He remembered how it had felt pushing against the relentless tide of the masked man's savage blows, predicting Yutai's every manoeuvre perfectly.

He retraced the entire fight in his mind, seeking a crack in the inexplicable flow of the Ibilis's movements. An explanation.

How did he hold me off for so long?

He tried to connect the style to different schools of martial arts, but nothing came to mind. Even the question as to how the Ibilis had escaped the lab while it was hailing down with gunfire and then run past the Tien Tao Rioters storming the building at the same time, remained unanswered.

It's as if the Ibilis had already choreographed his fight against me. Did I show my hand too early? Unlikely...

Every Kingmaker was a master of misdirection in combat, their moves as unreadable as an encrypted code. The training was rigorous and secretive, taught by living legends in the martial arts scene. The average Kingmaker knew more fighting forms than the average person could name. Yet, the Ibilis seemed to predict Yutai's strikes as if reading an open book. It hinted at something more sinister. Some sensory-base cybernetic implant that could outperform even the best fighters, a new fighting style, or perhaps something far more frightening… Kingmaker training itself.

Knowing the Ibilis had come close to death multiple times during the whole ordeal, Yutai felt a surge of frustration.

Would I have survived the fight if General Denzhen hadn't intervened?

Yutai never imagined there could be anyone in Kowloon capable of killing a Kingmaker in single combat. The mere possibility made him break out in a sweat.

Before long, the mouth of the Yu Tower loomed before him, a colossal portal that was always open, ingesting and releasing a constant flow of Kingmakers and civilian students headed towards the Yu Library on the second floor. The ground floor lobby was a sprawling nerve centre that branched into the lifeblood of their Kingmaker gang – offices, classrooms, weapons vaults, research laboratories, server rooms, dojos, and dormitories.

Yutai wove his way through the lobby, a solitary figure among a sea of Kingmakers walking in pairs.

Navigating into a corridor, Yutai greeted almost every face that waved at him, but no one noticed his uncharacteristic lack of interest in conversation. His journey ended at the eastern set of lifts. The bustle around him seemed unusually vigorous as he waited for the lift to come down.

I bet it's because of what happened in Ho Man Ting Square. All these lazy Kingmakers who haven't seen a day of action since graduation are probably answering calls from the Dragons now.

With a ding, the elevator doors slid open, and released three large Kingmakers. Yutai slipped inside the metallic chamber before any others could share the ride, his finger stabbing the button for the 28th floor, the sanctum of the Emperor himself. He only entered the throne room once

before; his centurion graduation ceremony nearly two annui-cycles ago.

Reaching the 28th level, Yutai stepped into the lobby of the throne room, where the grand double doors awaited wide open for him. As he walked into the narrow, red-carpeted hall, he could see Emperor Puyin atop his throne with three other men standing before him. His muffled footsteps still managed to echo off the walls and thin jade pillars, and as he got closer, he saw the backs of the three men more clearly. They were wearing green trench coats, the attire of the Dragons. He clenched his jaw as the magnitude of this meeting dawned on him.

Rows of the Emperor's elite Manchukuo guards stood ramrod straight at precise intervals down the hall, their imposing figures casting massive silhouettes against the dark walls. Overhead, additional guards glared down at him from the balconies. These Manchukuo guards were Kowloon's most esteemed warriors, their skills unquestioned, forming the steel backbone of the royal family's protection. They were former Lieutenant Kingmakers, hand-selected by the Emperor for his royal guard.

Yutai's reverie was broken by a clearer sight of the Emperor, sprawled on his throne. His lustrous red hanfu robes cascaded down the throne steps, their silken waves converging on the sprawling carpet that stretched down the hall.

At the foot of the throne steps, the three esteemed figures turned their heads at Yutai's approach. Generals Denzhen, Han Xi, and the seldom-seen General Cao.

But even rarer than seeing Cao himself was the sight of three Dragons in one room. Something significant was unfolding, and Yutai was standing at its epicentre. However, the eldest of the generals was missing – General Qin Shi.

'Shehui Yutai!' General Han Xi called out in a low voice as Yutai took position on his right side. 'It's good to see you.'

'Likewise, General,' Yutai whispered back as he bowed deeply to the Emperor.

General Han Xi was Yutai's favourite general out of the four, but that was considered the basic preference amongst Kingmakers. Everyone adored the

man, an old-timer who remained young at heart.

Looking at the Emperor, Yutai saw deep lines of worry etched on his face. His long, dark goatee was also unkempt, betraying a rare lapse in his meticulous grooming.

Strangely, the Emperor's advisor, Grand Chancellor Lin Zexu, was absent. It was most suspicious, as he seldom left his master's side.

The soft chime of the elevator echoed down the hall and broke Yutai's train of thought. The low hum of conversation slowly descended into the hall. Yutai turned his head and spotted the figures of Keung, Cheng, Ushi, Tao, and Shing, accompanied by General Qin Shi leading them.

So, all four generals ARE here, Yutai thought as his skin prickled with nerves.

The new entrants lined themselves up in a neat row next to Yutai, while General Qin Shi stood beside General Denzhen at the other end. Bowing in unison before the Emperor, the Emperor's audience fell into an expectant silence. But the Emperor's chin remained propped on his knuckles, as if finishing his current thoughts were more important than starting the meeting.

He looks more worried than I thought he'd be, Yutai thought.

'I bear disturbing news,' the Emperor's voice suddenly filtered through the hall. 'Earlier yesterday, a few hours before the work-cycle started, we received a message… from the surface.'

A collective gasp rippled through the room. Eyes widened, breaths hitched.

Did I hear that right? Did he say the surface?

This was enormous; apart from the first-hand accounts of Prophet Dong's miraculous pilgrimage over 600 annui-cycles ago, there had never been any confirmations of life on the surface. Many of Kowloon's secular scientists believed it was desolate and inhospitable, no different from No Man's Land, leaving everyone to speculate what mysteries awaited them up there. The room felt as though it had plunged into a deep, icy abyss, silence ringing in Yutai's ears as he struggled to comprehend the enormity of the news.

The Emperor continued, 'It is the first communication exchange in history. Neither of us were aware of each other's existence until recently.'

'How can we know for certain they're from the surface?' General Cao asked.

'We traced the source of their signal to nearly a kilometre above us. They also allege an attack from Kowloon, a plague they believe is of our making.'

'Your Majesty, how could we have attacked them if we didn't know they existed?' General Han Xi's query sliced through the stunned silence.

'I don't know. But the city above us has the very name that Dong mentioned in the Book of Lumen: Hong Kong.'

No way. Yutai's jaw fell slack. *THE Hong Kong?*

According to scripture, Hong Kong was the first mythical city Dong had entered on the surface. One of Dongism's greatest criticisms was the supposed impossibility of the prophet's journey to the surface. Despite his meticulously journaled four-year pilgrimage, sceptics claimed Dong had merely hid for four annui-cycles before reappearing and telling everyone he'd returned from the surface. The many places he'd allegedly visited, Hong Kong, Rome, Narakyo, Annapuram, many consider myths. But if people from Hong Kong had contacted the Emperor, it would be the first concrete evidence supporting a key narrative from Kowloon's most dominant religion, breathing literality into scripture.

The Emperor continued, 'Their leader has told me that diseased corpses have flooded their lakes and rivers. Tens of thousands of them. And they tracked them to here.'

'Of course…' General Qin Shi interjected. 'We have never truly known where our Memorial Pipes go. Dong claimed they lead to some mythical body of limitless water, where departed souls eventually float to the Light. If they led to surface civilisations this entire time, it would've happened millennia ago. Why now?'

'I could take the Ditu and investigate down the Memorial Pipes,' General Cao suggested.

'That isn't necessary, at least not yet, Cao.' The Emperor sat up straighter on his throne. 'For the time being, we've quelled suspicions of malice on our part, but their leader has made a list of demands. They want to evaluate Kowloon. Our manpower, our population size, our cultures and beliefs. If

they are as an advanced society as Dong said they were, we have to coexist peacefully. Chancellor Zexu is already compiling the requested information.' The hint of strain in the Emperor's voice suggested he was struggling to maintain his composure amidst the escalating crisis.

'Emperor, why is my team here?' Keung finally voiced the question that had been simmering in Yutai's mind.

'If the Yang find out about this, there's no telling what they will do. Given how reluctant your team has been to achieve anything meaningful, I'm issuing a new order.'

What reluctance? Yutai thought. *Didn't we just catch Jian for him?!*

'Forget any lead you have on minor Yang targets. That masked fool from Ho Man Ting has my city in an uproar. I want his head within the next 100-cycles! All your team has done is kill Jian and turn every goddamned King in this tower sour! I want his mask hanging in the Yau Museum of History before my Zhaisheng reaches its zenith! Do I make myself clear, son of Denzhen?'

'Yes, Emperor.' Keung gave his uncle a deep bow.

A knot of apprehension coalesced in Yutai's gut he grappled with the enormity of the Emperor's demands.

100-cycles? He's asking for the impossible.

Looking at his generals, the Emperor said, 'In these turbulent times, it's crucial that we present an image of unwavering strength, at least until my Zhaisheng is complete. Then everything will align as it should. As some of you may know, the lord of District Pik recently passed away. His son is being crowned as the new lord. Normally, this wouldn't concern me, but the east has a tendency to forget who their Emperor is. Denzhen, I want you to ensure there is a Kingmaker presence at the ceremony. Make it clear our attendance sanctifies the coronation. And remind the new runt who holds Kowloon's reins.'

General Denzhen nodded. 'Yes, Your Majesty. It will be done.'

'Thank you, brother. When Dong returned from the surface 600 annui-cycles ago, the revelation of people living on the surface scared Emperor Hongwu into creating defensive outposts around key points of entry

between Kowloon and No Man's Land. These were manned for about 200 annui-cycles before being deserted. Now that we know the surfacers are a threat once more, we need to reestablish the Hongwu outposts. Cao, go to the records and find out where they were. Take some Kings and bolster these locations with local gangsters.'

'Understood, your Majesty.'

'General Qin Shi, you are to meet with the southern warlords and get them to secure their Wildlands border. Border crossings are to be halted. Kowloon is under secret lockdown; no one enters or leaves my kingdom. I don't want to stress about infiltration while I am in talks with their leader.'

General Qin Shi bowed. The Emperor turned his gaze to General Han Xi.

'Han, assist Zexu with compiling the data requested by the surfacers. We don't have everything they want right now. Contact census organisations, data centres, and any group or company with statistics on Kowloon. Ignore any pleas for privacy; this takes precedence!'

General Han Xi bowed. 'Noted, Your Majesty.'

Yutai tried to imagine the thoughts swirling underneath the Emperor's grim countenance, but realised he would probably never understand the tensions of a ruler protecting almost a billion people.

The meeting ended with tensions in the air. After final bows, Keung's team formed a single line and vacated the throne hall, with the generals trailing behind.

Outside, as the doors to the hall closed, the generals took the lift down while the rest of Keung's team lingered in the waiting room..

'What now, sir?' Tao asked Keung. All six had formed a rough circle, awaiting orders from their silent lieutenant.

'Sir?' Yutai prodded. 'What's the plan?'

'100 work-cycles?' Ushi rubbed the back of his neck. 'The Emperor must think we are the granter of miracles!'

'I can't believe it,' Cheng said. 'The surface… they're actually up there. Not some Dongist metaphor for the afterlife. There are actual civilisations above us, right now.'

'Next, it'll be dancing sewer rodents,' Shing snarked.

Keung activated his holocommunicator and initiated a call. All six pairs of eyes hovered over the holographic display that shimmered above his wrist. It was a call to Han Shizhou, the Tai Li commander from Yau.

'Lieutenant? How did the meeting go?' A digitised voice crackled through the tiny speaker.

'Could've been better. Meet me in lecture room 40 on the 13th floor of Yu Tower an hour before the work-cycle lamps dim. And bring Jin with you; we have a lot of work ahead of us.'

'Sounds good, Lieutenant. We'll see you there. Good day.'

The comms line went silent, and Keung looked up at everyone else who had listened to the call.

'You all heard me. We're meeting to follow up on this lead in Ho Man Ting an hour before the dimming. Let's pray to the Light that it leads us somewhere.'

'Yes sir,' Cheng said. 'You heard the Lieutenant, everyone. Get some rest! I want no late-comers to the meeting!'

With that, they all dispersed towards the various elevators at the end of the hall, some in pairs, others alone, each wrapped up in their own thoughts about the daunting task that lay ahead. But right now, they all wondered how they might kill time until the meeting started.

An hour before the dimming, Yutai thought.

Before Dong's birth, Kowloon had never slept. The hundreds of thousands of lamps strung across buildings never turned off. People would sleep whenever they felt the need to and stayed awake for as long as their jobs and daily needs demanded.

When the great prophet and philosopher Dong Songzhu returned from the surface, he spoke of their universal sleeping times, dictated by a single holy light that shone on the world. And Emperor Hongwu fell in love with the idea.

He was fascinated by the enchanting tale of an omnipresent and divine light governing the rhythms of life. No company-mandated sleep-cycles for workers, no cultural and tribal sleep times, no longer sleep-cycles for the rich and shorter sleep-cycles for the poor; just one single cycle for all. A

realm where all beings would rest and work in harmony, unencumbered by the whims of status or circumstance.

So, Emperor Hongwu set out to bring this vision to Kowloon, replacing discord with unity and cohesion. Within an annui-cycle, they programmed all lamps to turn off after a full waking 16-hour work-cycle, and turn back on after a 10-hour sleep-cycle.

In 626 A.T. 3, not long after Dong's great return from the surface, all of Kowloon had their eyes open at once and gathered below the thousands of hanging lamps throughout every district. Every level of every street of every groundscraper in Kowloon was filled with people, everyone looking up at the lamps that always shone constantly.

They witnessed it dim to a soft orange light, and Kowloon experienced its first twilight. The cityscape, a hive of relentless activity, was now suspended in hushed silence. As the lamps dimmed, so too did the world, its vibrancy giving way to a serenity that seemed almost foreign. It was a major turning point in the public perception of Dong, who was starting to be taken seriously. This man claiming to have returned from the surface could potentially transform Kowloon forever.

Everyone made their way back home that night, and for the first time ever, all of Kowloon slept at once.

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'Have you searched the homes of her immediate family? In-laws, cousins?' Yutai held his wrist near his mouth for clear communication. Opposite him, Shing lounged, his outstretched legs crossed atop the table of the smoky dama den. He toyed with the smoking pipe in his hand, exhaling slow rings of smoke that danced in the dim light. In the middle of their table was a slim glass fixture. Smoke spiralled upwards from a clear liquid in the bottom, feeding into a flexible pipe.

'My Black Jackets have turned every district and sub-district upside down. I'm up to my neck with these bloody doctors.'

Shing listened to Yutai and Aunt Tong talk about another scientist from the late Dr Chinh's team, who had recently vanished from her witness protection.

'Aunt, I recall you telling me she was the scientist who went completely mad during the expedition. Maybe she just ran away.'

'No, something tells me the Yang got to her, Yutai. Chinh went missing the exact same way until we found him in… that state.'

'Well, I found some of Dr Jode's research notes that Chinh reviewed. Notes from their expedition. He crossed out half her work. I get the feeling it wasn't just Jode's calculations he disliked?'

'Dr Jode was Chinh's harshest critic during their time at the dam. Recall how I mentioned he thought the dam might fail within a few annui-cycles? Well, Dr Jode's calculations made her believe they had at least a hundred annui-cycles. This difference led her to sway many others in the expedition against Chinh. In the end, only Chinh believed his own calculations, while the rest of the camp rallied behind Jode. But there was another problem: Jode stopped taking her medication during the expedition. It kept her schizophrenia in check. God knows why she did that. By the time she returned, she was on the brink of stage five No Man's Paranoia, and her mind has been resistant to therapy since. When Chinh died shortly after their return, she became convinced she was next, that my Black Jackets couldn't protect her either. One of them said she screamed and shouted every day from her room about needing Kingmaker protection. Then, poof. Yesterday, she went missing during a guard change.'

'Ask her if a Black Jacket could've helped her,' Shing mouthed to Yutai.

Nodding, Yutai fixed his gaze on Shing as he relayed over the line, 'And you're certain none of your Black Jacket's helped her to escape?'

'Yes. I'm not saying my ranks are immune to bribery, but if there's someone Dr Jode wouldn't trust, especially in her paranoid state, it would be one of her Black Jacket guards. She never hid how incompetent she thought they were. She practically hated them!'

'I see…' Yutai responded. Shing met his gaze briefly, shrugged non-committally, and then tilted his head back to release another plume of smoke into the air.

'Aunty, I have one other question about Chinh. Did he have any connection to district Ho Man Ting? Or more specifically, Ho Man Ting University? A

professor friend, a former student, or a colleague even?'

'Chinh had connections to professors in his field from every major university. I can't say who he specifically knew from HMTU.'

Yutai sighed. *I don't think she will be of much help from here.*

'Very well, Aunt. Thank you. We'll be back in Kam Shan soon to track down Dr Jode. If she's alive, she may have the answers to some questions we have about the late doctor.'

'My best bet is that she was headed towards District Yu to search for your tower. I really wasn't joking about her demanding the Kingmakers,' Aunt Tong said.

'It's been less than a work-cycle since she vanished, so I don't think she could've gone too far. We'll see you soon, Aunty.'

'Lovely. Thank you, handsome.'

The holographic image on his wrist flickered and compressed back into its small recess. Yutai's arm dropped to rest on the table as he extended his other hand to receive the pipe from Shing. His partner passed it and Yutai took a deep pull, his lungs expanding with the fragrant smoke and his head momentarily spinning. He exhaled hefty plumes of smoke through his nostrils and mouth and leaned back as the buzz slowly receded.

'So,' Yutai began. 'A group of scientists go into No Man's Land to investigate Chuan Wan Dam. After some time, they return to Kowloon with fractured minds, everyone in conflict with Dr Chinh. Why? Because they all thought his calculations about the dam collapsing were crazy. Impossible. Scientist-turned-doomsday preacher. Does something sound familiar about this?'

'No.' Shing shook his head as he gestured with his fingers for the pipe.

Yutai handed it to him, resting his head on his fist, deep in thought. 'Prophet Dong's mythical lost canon. What do you know about it?'

Shing glanced at him with a raised brow and took a pull from the pipe. 'Dong's lost canon?' He replied after a brief exhale. 'I know it's a myth. A legend that many adventurers have perished searching for. Supposedly, he wrote a new trilogy of Holy Texts before his death, in which he renounced everything he wrote in the original Holy Canon. Legend says his apostles hid

the manuscripts deep in the Huang Wildlands, where the Yang apparently found them after the rebellions. Now, the lost canon is central to their ideologies.'

'Precisely, my friend. People say this mythical canon is nothing like the Book of Lumen, the Book of the Redeemer, and the Book of Memory. The trilogy we know speaks of optimism and hope that God will one day forgive us and lift us back to the surface. It was his covenant with Dong. However, the mythical Lost Canon speaks of Dong's hopelessness and God's abandonment. Our fate is one of darkness until we venture to the surface ourselves and show God we've changed.'

'Yeah, so what?'

'Come on, Shing. Haven't you figured it out?'

Shing took another drag from the pipe, blowing the smoke straight into Yutai's face. 'Nope.'

Yutai crinkled his nose, waved the smoke away, and leaned over the table.

'Shing, you dumbass. These are the myths the Yang literally believe, that Kowloon's destruction is inevitable. They see our city as a sinking boat, that Dong's final commandment to save us was immediate exodus. No prayers, no spiritual enrichment, no waiting on God for forgiveness like he said originally. Straight action. That's what the Yang have been preaching.'

'Okay, I'm starting to see what you mean. The Yang believe we must escape to the surface to fulfil Dong's true prophecy. Dr Chinh believed the dam will collapse and destroy Kowloon. I'll bite, seems like there's some overlap in agendas. But if that's the case, why would the Yang kill him?'

'Because maybe the Yang need the dam's threat to be real.' Yutai cracked his knuckles as he went on. 'If Chinh could've warned everyone and fixed the dam, the biggest proof of their prophecy goes away. Maybe they're waiting till the flood waters are at our door.'

'But that's even *if* the dam will fail. We still don't know what happened down in Chuan Wan Dam. If it was Chinh or Dr Jode who was right about when it'll collapse.'

'Whatever's the truth, I don't think this will be as straightforward as we thought.'

Shing stayed silent for a moment. 'Remember the person who picked up your call back at Chinh's place?'

'That Ho Man Ting number?' Yutai asked.

'Yeah. Was it a man's voice?'

'The voice was digitally masked. I assumed it was a man, but I could be wrong.'

'What if it was Dr Jode who picked up?'

Yutai pursed his lips. 'That'd be interesting. They could've been working together without the Aunt knowing.'

The timer on Yutai's holocommunicator rang. It was an hour from the dimming of the lamps for the day's work-cycle.

'All right, let's go meet Keung,' Yutai said as he stood up and stretched. 'I hope he's cooked up some strategy.'

'If he has and it's a good one, we'll know it was Cheng's idea.'

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'Shit! My finger!' Tao shrieked for the fourth time.

'You okay up there?' Ushi asked. Tao stood on the top rung of the ladder, the top half of his body above the ceiling and inside the attic. The tile panel Tao had removed to gain access to the space above the ceiling stood leaning against the bottom of the ladder.

'Oh, thank the Light for you two beautiful souls!' the young store owner gushed. 'It's been so hot since the cooling systems stopped working! I am glad you Kingmakers passed by when you did. I thought I'd start melting.' She clasped her hands together as she stood beside Ushi, watching Tao's lower half standing on the ladder. Sounds of metallic banging came from the darkness.

'FUCK! My finger!' Tao shrieked again, his voice echoing from within the attic.

'Quit your squawking and get on with it, Tao!' Ushi reprimanded. 'If it weren't for the fact I'd probably get stuck climbing through that hole, I'd be up there myself.' He tossed a sideways glance at the young woman to see her reaction, his muscles flexing in a somewhat exaggerated display of strength. However, the store owner missed his theatrics as her eyes remained on Tao.

'Whatever, brother,' came Tao's muffled retort from above, punctuated by clanging noises. 'I doubt you have the cognitive capacity to comprehend, let alone repair, a G53 cooling system. These machines are ancient! No offence, miss.'

'Actually, the Emperor has offered all the shops free upgraded cooling systems. But since we're on the eighth floor, the terrace above needs to be taken apart to install the new one. The cooling company quoted me 100,000 Hongs for the installation. I can't afford that!'

'Bastard cooling companies…' Ushi muttered, just loud enough to make sure it was within earshot.

'AH!' Tao shrieked again. Ushi rolled his eyes. 'What is it this time?'

'I touched something fuzzy! I-I think there's a nest of sewer rodents up here!'

'Yeah, right! We're not in East Kowloon, fool. You probably just found a mirror.'

The young shopkeeper couldn't help but stifle a giggle, her eyes gleaming with amusement. Seizing the moment, Ushi turned his charm to full throttle. 'Apologies, ma'am. I have no clue how my friend here sees sewer rodents in the cleanest shop in the district. I swear, the only sewer around here is his mouth, and the bullshit factory inside it!' His words were met with a chorus of laughter from the shopkeeper.

'Bullshit factory inside his mouth.' Hah, good one Ushi, he thought to himself with a grin.

However, their momentary mirth was abruptly cut short. A strangled cry from Tao filled the room, this time tinged with genuine fear. Ushi's heart leapt as he watched Tao snatch his holstered hand cannon and hop into the inky blackness of the attic.

Ushi's brows pressed together as the store became quiet. 'Tao?'

The shopkeeper took a step back. 'Is your friend okay?'

As they both stared into the void of the removed tile panel, bursts of white light erupted and pulsed from above. Ushi grabbed for his hand cannon and lunged for the ladder, his free hand seeking purchase on the cold rungs. 'Tao! What's going on?! What the fuck are you shooting?!'

Ushi had one foot on the ladder when Tao's head emerged from the darkness above, looking down at Ushi with a mischievous smile. The light from the visor of his cap shone into Ushi's eyes, blinding him. 'Fuck, man! Turn those floodlights off!'

'Oh, sorry.' Tao tapped on the side of his cap. 'Sorry about that, brother, but there really were sewer rodents. Freaking huge ones, too! Here, look,' Tao dragged out a dead sewer rodent the size of two dusk-cats by the tail, waving it near Ushi's face. Smoke trailed from the cauterised wound on its now almost non-existent head.

The shopkeeper squealed and ran behind the counter.

'Get that thing out of my face!' Ushi recoiled, gagging. He stepped off the ladder as Tao laughed and teased Ushi with the rodent. At last, he stopped waving the massive rodent and studied it, his delight incongruous with the grim discovery.

'Look at this thing; it's huge!' Tao's voice dripped with morbid fascination. 'I've never seen rodents even half its size in East Kowloon. Even in Tai Sheung, rodent central!'

'But we're not in Tai Sheung,' Ushi responded warily. 'We're in Yu, the Emperor's district, away from that shit. Those creatures aren't meant to be here, Tao. Let alone ones *that* size. Yezu Christ, what have they been eating?!'

'I don't know, but I've worked out why the cooling system is busted.' Tao vanished once again into the abyss, which was followed by the rhythmic pounding of his tools on metal.

The young woman peaked cautiously over the countertop while Ushi stared up at the black void, ready to suggest calling an actual G53 technician. But then, the comforting sound of the cooling system turning on silenced him.

kkkzt... MMMMM...

A low, grumbling purr reverberated through the tiny shop as the cooling vent spluttered to life. Ushi expelled a sigh of relief, feeling the tension bleed from his shoulders. Tao's head reappeared through the opening in the ceiling.

'Rodent was jammed in one of the gears at the back,' Tao explained to his partner as he descended the ladder. 'I've cleared out the nest, but it's too cramped for me to check for openings. I think it's best to call a professional or else the shop may have more unwanted guests.'

When his head was just below the ceiling, Tao gestured to Ushi for the ceiling tile and pushed it back into place. He hopped off the ladder and brushed the palms of his gloves, creating a small storm of dust in front of him.

'Ma'am, it's safe to come out now,' Ushi announced. 'Your cooling systems are working. And damn, are they loud! If you get a new system, try the Hiyazaki models. They don't rumble as these do.'

'Okay, calm down, you salesman,' Tao said. 'Look at the time, brother. We're five minutes past the dimming. Let's get to the tower before Tribune Cheng loses it.'

He faced the counter, where the shopkeeper was still hiding. 'Good luck with business, ma'am.'

'I think I'm just going to sell the entire shop,' came a quite voice from behind it.

13

Chung Fu

Rolling his shoulders, Keung confessed, 'Cheng, I feel cornered, trapped. The energy to fret over the surface has all but left me, and now I have to solve this entire Yang problem within 100 cycles!'

Cheng's calm voice cut through the gloom in the lecture hall. 'We're all in this together, sir. Isn't it business as usual? We're swimming in leads, more than we've had in the last two annui-cycles. We have more allies and more resources than ever before; sir, we'll weather this storm. The revelations about the surface? Emperor Puyin's problem, not ours.'

Head propped on his hand, Keung sat at the front, occupying the spot reserved for the lecturers. The holo-screen beside him lay dormant and silent. Cheng was perched in the front row, barely visible. Keung couldn't help but remember his friend sitting in the same seat during their academy days. That was eight annui-cycles ago, but it felt like a different lifetime.

Back then, lessons on combat, climbing, mathematics, science, literature, history, and philosophy filled their days. They were moulded to be Kingmakers, expecting their toughest challenges to be resolving petty politics and squabbles between nobles. A Kingmaker's role was to mediate in disputes, protect private property, track violent criminals and on rare, momentous occasions, carry out a royal regicide. But now, the Emperor had thrown them into the brutal darkness of counterterrorism. How Keung wished they'd had a class for that in the academy.

'Did anything strike you as… *odd* that night?' Keung searched Cheng's face for any inkling of insight he'd come to expect from him.

Cheng was silent for a moment. 'Well,' he finally said. 'It would probably be more challenging to overlook all the oddities of that night in Ho Man Ting. Let's go over everything that happened. First, the Tien Tao remained at their fort until the Ibilis was nearly *done* with his speech. Them storming into the university so late didn't sit right with me. Mr Enji is known to deploy his infamous Rioters like unleashed wardogs. I assumed he'd dive in headfirst to get his Tien Tao in position to catch the Ibilis. These are the most skilled operatives from the south and they let an easy target escape.' He paused for a moment, lost in thought. 'Next, I don't buy the Tien Tao's claim they knew nothing about this grand Yang event happening, while the Tai Li, hundreds and hundreds of kilometres away in central Kowloon, had sniffed out suspicious activity a couple of cycles prior. But let's entertain the idea that such a monumental event on their home turf just *slipped* under their radar. It's been less than 48 hours since the incident, and Warlord Xinjian has yet to make a single arrest in connection to the speech. But two nights ago, that courtyard held nearly 10,000 Yang sympaths. Now they've scattered to the wind around the city, and every one of them has grounds for arrest. Yet nothing's been reported to us. Makes me wonder what the hell he's playing at.'

Keung took a moment to process Cheng's theories before voicing his concern. 'Do you think the southern warlords are conspiring with the Yang?'

'If there are districts we should worry about, the south would be top of the list. Throughout history, they've been the first to raise their voices and bear arms. Protest and rebellion is a strong part of their culture. And, in the aftermath of each protest against the Dynasty, the Emperor always tightens his grip around their necks. Like a parent handling a troubled child.'

Keung's shoulders slumped. 'I wish our relationship with the south wasn't always this strained. Emperor Puyin has made a lot of effort to strengthen ties with the Zhaisheng. He's invested billions of Hongs in the south building universities and stadiums. Thought those southerner's would feel a bit

grateful.' He glanced at his holocommunicator to check the time – they were an hour away from dimming.

'With any luck, the Tai Li and the others should be here soon,' Keung said.

Suddenly, a knock on the opaque glass door at the rear echoed through the silent room.

'Come in!' Cheng called out, prompting the door to slide open and reveal the figures of Han and Jin, the two Tai Li representatives from Yau. 'Ah, welcome. Please, have a seat,' the tribune greeted.

The two Tai Li bowed and slipped into the last row of seats, where the shadows of the room were the darkest.

'Shouldn't there be six more of you?' Keung asked.

'Yes, but in the interests of preserving confidentiality, they won't be interacting directly with you Kingmakers,' Han explained. 'Ying and General Denzhen made it clear how vital it was to maintain the secrecy of this operation. We'll be the buffer for all knowledge shared between us and the rest of our team.'

'Sounds like a plan,' Cheng chimed in. 'I hope to get a glimpse of your team in action someday, Han.'

'That may yet come to pass.'

A brief knock came from the door and it slid open, revealing Yutai and Shing shuffling into the dimly lit lecture hall. They dispersed into the middle rows and sat down.

'Good to see you two,' Cheng greeted from his seat. 'Heard from Tao and Ushi?'

'I think they're on the way,' Yutai said as he made himself comfortable in his chosen seat.

'Let's just get this started; those two can catch up when they get here.' Shing's tone was brisk and devoid of patience.

Keung gave a stern shake of his head. 'No, we need all of us here. This is too important.'

Shing rolled his eyes and leaned back in his chair with an elbow on the backrest. The air in the room was thick with anticipation, each individual seemingly lost in their own thoughts. The only sounds present were the hum

of the dormant holo-screen and the distant murmur of the world outside the tower.

'How was the trip here, Han? Jin?' Cheng asked.

'Yeah, it was all right,' Jin responded. 'Managed to get a quick nap in.'

'Sounds great. The Luen siblings doing all right?'

'As good as they could be under the current circumstances.'

'I suppose in times like these, that's all we can really hope for.' Cheng directed his attention back to the front.

Awkward coughs echoed in the room as they waited for Tao and Ushi. Keung's foot started tapping of its own accord, when the door finally slid open to reveal a flustered Ushi and a dust-covered Tao.

Apologies and excuses tumbled out of Tao's mouth, 'Shit, so sorry we're late. Had to fix this cooling unit, and then some rodents attacked me, and then Ushi needed to pray and—'

'It's fine, Tao,' Keung cut him off. 'Take a seat and we can get started.'

As they settled, Keung switched on the projector, casting an empty blue screen on the board.

'We've convened here tonight with a pressing objective: to dismantle the Yang.' He walked back and forth. 'In the room, we have some fresh faces, unfamiliar with our operations and intel. So, to make sure everyone is on the same page, I'll review what we already know. Our objective, our strategies after tonight, our plan moving forward – everything that will get us closer to our endgame of a safer Kowloon.'

He glanced briefly at Cheng, who offered a supportive nod. This small gesture bolstered Keung, steadying his breath as he pivoted to face the luminous board behind him. After a tap on his holocommunicator, the board flickered to a presentation Keung had prepared. The lecture board glowed white with two familiar faces in the middle – separate photos, taken from a distance, capturing a man and a woman engaged in business dealings.

'Siu-Bak and Bijun. Information on them is scarce. What we their fathers fought in the District Rebellions but, after rejecting the peace terms, retreated into the Huang Wildlands with other combatants. For two decades, they rebuilt their numbers. Now, their sons and daughters have returned

to South Kowloon, claiming to have found Dong's lost trilogy and using its teachings to drive recruitment around every district.'

Keung pressed a button on his holocommunicator and Jian's face appeared, crossed out in red.

'Until recently, Jian led the Yangs in Central Kowloon, with Bijun in the west, Siu-Bak in the east, and the Ibilis in the south. But with Jian's passing, the remaining three have reclaimed their positions at the top of the Yang hierarchy. Our data indicates they have since divided Jian's central Kowlooni clusters among themselves, but their operations are a mess. This is the best time to strike.'

Another tap on his wrist and a fourth face appeared on the board. It was a masked figure, standing with his arms stretched atop a high ledge. A collective murmur rippled through the room as everyone recognised the image from the recent spontaneous rally in Ho Man Ting Square.

'The Ibilis, or as the Yang call him, Mogwei. We know more about No Man's Land than we do about *him.* His authority might equal to Siu-Bak and Bijun's, but he wields far greater influence. To many Yang throughout Kowloon, he is seen as the true leader of their cause. What's more worrying is that the Ibilis heads the Yangs of South Kowloon, the most violent branch of them all. He seeks to set an example for the rest.' Keung's voice cracked, the talk of the Ibilis choking him.

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And none felt more choked up than Yutai, seeing the man he had fought against not so long ago.

'Yutai, given you're the only one here who's encountered him, do you have any useful intel to share?' Keung asked.

A brief silence hung over the room as Yutai sat transfixed. He could still smell the incense imbued in Mogwei's robes. The Zhanshi mask, once just an object from a tale, was now something real to fear.

'I'll take that as a no, then,' Keung said with a note of disappointment in his voice.

Snapping back to the present, Yutai hurriedly replied, 'Sorry, what did you ask?'

'I asked if you had any insights or experiences to share regarding the Ibilis.'

'Oh right, yes. The Ibilis is a formidable adversary. I was unfamiliar with his combat style, but he seemed very knowledgeable about mine. Barely held my own against him. I wouldn't be surprised if he's an ex-King, or received training from one.'

'That's impossible,' Tao interjected. 'All retired Kingmakers live here in Yu. We can account for every one of them.'

From the shadows at the rear of the room, Han Shizhou entered the discussion. 'It's no ex-King. That, I know for sure. Yutai, sir, you had a hard time because the Ibilis is most likely a practitioner of Chung Fu.'

'Chung Fu?' Ushi echoed.

'Yes, you heard me right,' Han looked at the southern Kingmaker. 'A martial art long faded into total darkness. It was once prevalent in the ancient towns of the Huang Wildlands. Its roots trace back centuries, far preceding the Hongwu era, and our enigmatic Ibilis likely knows this deadly but lost style.'

'I know of Chung Fu,' Cheng added. 'It's a distant cousin of Tai Chi.'

Ushi let out a snort. 'Tai Chi? You mean the meditative form we learned in secondary school? How can anything related to Tai Chi be deadly?'

'You might not know about Old Tai Chi looked, sir,' Han said calmly. 'It was a sought-after martial art, demanding years of rigorous training and lifestyle changes. Its techniques sharpened focus and pushed practitioners beyond the limits of exhaustion. It could numb the pain of broken bones, strengthen torn muscles, and achieve feats that would require cybernetic implants today. Then there was its counterpart, Chung Fu.'

Yutai frowned as he listened to Han's troubling revelation. 'It was once said to be the only martial art that could counter every other fighting form. However, it came with a life-altering catch; it required a capacity that the natural body could not offer. Chung Fu *needs* cybernetic enhancements. That's why it went extinct. Fewer and fewer masters were forged.'

Ushi scoffed. 'Boogeymen wandering in sewers, extinct martial art forms that could destroy Kowloon with the flick of a finger,' Ushi noted out loud. 'These are just bedtime stories we grew up with, south Kowlooni myths and

legends! How do we know any of this is true?'

'Because six annui-cycles ago, on the borders between District Nam Bato and the Wildlands,' Jin said, 'we came up against a lone Yang combatant armed with a rough understanding of Chung Fu. His body moved like a machine as he dispatched five of our strongest before making his escape. He made sure to brag about how he did it with such ease: Chung Fu. I'm convinced there are still one or two masters out there, hidden deep in the heart of the Wildlands, imparting their knowledge to those bold enough to seek it out.'

His gaze then shifted to Yutai. 'If you struggled this much against the Ibilis, it's probable our masked foe had similar skills in Chung Fu. Perhaps more skilled than the Yang Han and I encountered in Nam Bato. If we're right, then Yutai sir, you have both Han's and my respect. We've witnessed its raw ferocity first-hand.'

Yutai nodded in relief. *So, that's why I struggled. Chung Fu. A long-forgotten myth is clawing its way back from extinction. And now, it's become a weapon for the Yang.*

At the front of the room, Keung inhaled and pressed another button on his holocommunicator. The display blinked and morphed, in the form of raw brainstorming, nascent plans and strategies splashing across its surface like a digital mosaic.

Dr Chinh's name floated around. There was mention of Chuan Wan Dam and Fort Ho Man Ting. Other peculiar names were present, such as General Denzhen, Jian, Siu-Bak, Bijun, and various members of the detachment. In the centre, all lines converged on one sentence: *The Ibilis in Ho Man Ting.*

Yutai watched Keung scanning the constellation of possibilities. He wasn't simply reviewing them; he knew the lieutenant was wrestling with each strategy and testing their mettle.

'I have a gut feeling we can't ignore Dr Chinh's murder in Kam Shan,' Keung said out loud. 'It's clear the dam has the Yang spooked. There's no question the Ibilis's appearance at the square and the mysterious call from Dr Chinh's quarters are connected. If some active Yang operation related to Chuan Wan Dam is going on, our investigation into Dr Chinh's death

might catch them off-guard.'

Murmurs of agreement rippled through the air. Yutai nodded the most fervently. *Blending these two investigations is a good move, sir. I'm sure it all fits together.*

'Yutai and Shing, what's your next step in the Kam Shan murder investigation?'

'We need to track down a Dr Jode, a critic of Chinh's who joined him for the expedition,' Yutai explained. 'She's recently gone missing, and the Aunt thinks its the Yang about to strike twice.'

'Brilliant. Ushi and Shing, you two will track Dr Jode before she's hurt. Find out about her captors. Anything that may lead to the Ibilis or tell us what they're planning with Chuan Wan Dam,' Keung instructed. 'That dam is vital to Kowloon.'

Before Keung could continue, the room's energy shifted. 'What? Why aren't I going with Shing?' Yutai asked as a frown creased his brow.

Shing's expression also mirrored his puzzlement. It was an unorthodox decision. Ushi and Shing despised each other, while Yutai and Shing had the best field synergy of the entire detachment. The traditional partnerships within the team had always been Shing with Yutai, Ushi with Tao, and Keung with Cheng. The sudden switch was akin to altering the steps in a well-choreographed dance. Yutai wondered if this disruption would impact their respective performances.

'You two need to learn to work together,' Keung began. 'We're entering a phase where collaboration is key, even with those we might not fully trust or like. We've grown too comfortable working in isolation. That's what our fighting in the change rooms showed me, and that has to change. The Tai Li won't be the only outsiders working together with us. The Tien Tao Rioters will also—'

Shing cut Keung off. 'Yeah, fuck that.' His chair creaked as he leaned back, the air around him bristling with defiance. 'First, the two fools behind me, and now the Tien Tao? Count me out of any operation with those shehs.'

'Keung,' Yutai added cautiously. 'We can't trust the Rioters. Did you forget how they acted that night in Ho Man Ting?'

'I'm sorry,' Ushi called out. 'Are you seriously implying *the* Tien Tao Rioters have gone rogue?'

'That's exactly what he's implying, genius,' Shing snarked

Ushi shook his head. 'No, not the Tien Tao. They're one of the most seasoned special ops units in Kowloon. I don't believe one bit they've just switched sides!'

'What if the Tien Tao haven't gone rogue, but the top-level Ho Man Ting government they serve has?' Yutai shot back. Ushi faced Yutai and listened with a frown. 'You saw what happened with them, brother. The suspicious delay to the square provided the Ibilis with enough time to conclude his speech.'

'I heard General Denzhen held a cease-fire until the speech was finished, too,' Tao chimed in. 'Does that make him a traitor?'

'Fine, what about his escape?' Yutai said as he straightened up. 'The Ibilis slipped right through their fingers as he exited the building. There's less than ten possible exits in the whole university. Are these really the legendary southern Rioter's we've read so much about?' Yutai folded his arms and regarded the rest of the team.

'So, what do we do? Interrogate every Rioter till someone gives?' Ushi's question rang out.

'Better that than allowing them to work closer with you,' Jin retorted, his voice floating down from the back of the room.

'Shame! Shame on us all!' Ushi's voice surged with indignation as he looked at everyone one by one, the air around him crackling with his fervour. 'To even think of levelling such vicious charges against our allies! This should be a last resort theory, not the first dart we throw in the face of uncertainty!'

'I agree,' Tao added. 'It's only been 25 annui-cycles since we brokered a painful peace with the south. This accusation could unravel everything we've achieved.'

Yutai knew Ushi was being overly defensive of the Tien Tao, but he understood why. Ushi was a southerner, just like the Tien Tao. Accusing southerners of being untrustworthy carried much more weight than if the accusation had been against anyone else. They were already stereotyped as

dishonest and hungry for violence.

'I understand all these concerns,' Keung said. 'But we have our reasons for pulling the Tien Tao into our operations. Yesterday, Generals Denzhen and Qin Shi held a lengthy meeting with Warlord Xinjian and Mr Enji, the lord of Ho Man Ting and district coordinator for the Tien Tao Rioters. They stood by their innocence, attributing the failures of the Rioters to a lack of training. They've offered to share vital information to aid in the capture of the Ibilis. The general thought it was a good idea to gauge their loyalties up close. So we all have secondary orders to monitor them in action. This is a direct order and I don't have any issue with it.'

'No issues?' Jin spoke up again. 'Do you seriously believe Lord Xinjian doesn't have his own vested interests in weaving his Rioters into Kingmaker operations?'

'Oh, the irony… you, of all people not wanting outsiders,' Shing snarled.

'Keung, we urge you to reconsider allying with the Rioters,' Han pleaded. 'Our independent investigations have led us to believe Ho Man Ting has been sympathetic to the Yang for a while now. Perhaps even since the rebellions.'

'I understand your worries, but this is the most sensible course we have, brothers.' Keung tapped on his holocommunicator and the next slide appeared. 'The generals insist on tangible proof of treachery before we take measures against District Ho Man Ting.'

'But—' Yutai began, his protest cut short as Cheng's voice echoed throughout the room, dousing the spark of defiance.

'You three fail to grasp the full implication of the Tien Tao Rioters indeed allying with the Yang. Our only option would be a full-on royal regicide. Do *any* of you comprehend the catastrophic fallout Kowloon will suffer if we decide to go down that road? If we are to fully commit, we must have the evidence to back up the conviction! What don't you guys understand?!'

That was enough to shut them up. Everyone knew what a royal regicide entailed – the original, sole purpose of the Kingmakers. Many agreed that the last regicide was the catalyst for the brutal District Rebellions. If there was one thing every Kingmaker agreed on, it was that this was something

to be avoided at all costs.

Finally, Keung turned to face the display board, which contained names from the room divided into two distinct teams.

Shing and Ushi made up one, tagged with the assignment: *Locate Dr Jode*. The second group, an ensemble of Keung, Cheng, Han, Jin and two unrecognisable names, were tasked with an objective labelled *Follow Yang Lead.*

'Shing, Ushi,' Keung's voice was firm and direct. 'You two need to work on collaborating. Your task is clear, so combine your strengths.'

Ushi gave a slow, thoughtful nod, while Shing barely acknowledged Keung, his indifference obvious.

'Who are they?' Tao enquired, pointing to the duo of unfamiliar names on the second team. *Tuwan Nwin and Chan Ng.*

'Probably Tien Tao scum,' Jin spat. Names that you wouldn't find anywhere else, distinctly southern.

Yutai raised his arm. 'Why aren't Tao and I on the board?'

'You are both reserved for the time being,' Keung explained. 'These are the opening moves of our chess game; the board is still being set, until we discern the optimal strategy. Too many unknowns right now.'

'What? But there must be something I can do,' Yutai protested.

Cheng glowered at him. 'Yutai, if Lieutenant Keung thinks this is the best way forward, then it is. We aren't in the business of thinking outside the box; we follow orders.'

That shut Yutai up. He slumped back in his seat, his body language a wordless mirror of his feelings. *There's no talking back to Cheng.*

Tao seemed as unperturbed as ever, his serene demeanour unbroken by his exclusion.

Keung wasn't surprised by the pushback in the room. He knew he'd have critics at every turn. But he was resolved to see it through.

'Now, I'll briefly outline our plans. Mr Enji has generously shared the location of an abandoned Yang base his Rioters recently seized in Ho Man Ting City. Together with the Tai Li, Cheng and I will meet up with two Tien Tao Rioter contacts. Our job is to secure the base and see what we can find.

Leads will be uploaded to our shared channel on the holocommunicator. Han, Jin, I'll need to speak with you afterwards about getting you on that channel. We have 100-cycles to dismantle the Yang from the top down, and it starts with finding the Ibilis. We have a wealth of resources at our disposal to bring them all down.'

Shing yawned and stretched loudly, momentarily breaking Keung's flow.

'Pay attention, sewer dog,' Ushi barked from the other side of the room.

Keung's lips twitched before he continued to explain his strategy.

14

Wall Rat

Lay not aside the fear of the Light, O Eastern Lord, and beware that ye transgress not the bounds which the path of Dong hath fixed. Observe the injunctions laid upon you in his teachings, and take good heed not to overstep their limits. Be vigilant that ye may not do injustice to anyone, be it to the extent of a single algal phytoplankton. Tread ye the path of justice, for this, verily, is the straight path.

Compose your differences and take up your armaments, so that the burden of your expenditures may be lightened, and that the minds and hearts of our children may be soothed. Heal the dissensions that divide us, and soon you will no longer be in need of any armaments except what the protection of your cities and territories demandeth. Fear ye the Darkness, and take heed of our cause, for soon the Dark shall pass and the Light intervene.

Boquin squinted, the dark eyeliner around his waterline sharpening its intensity. He checked the hidden text once more, "Reply to 624-31 Ave, Wonto Premium Sweets mail box."

'The concealed lettering won't disappear, Boquin. That's the fifth time you've checked,' Liqui said from behind him.

'A touch of caution never hurt. Picture this: The one people are calling East Kowloon's saviour warms up to our cause. Only for him to have no way of letting us know. What a disappointment that'd be.' He clicked his tongue at the thought.

'But what are the odds Lord Mingchi would understand our cause? The man seems too virtuous to want to help us.'

'Liqui, what are you on about?' Boquin frowned as he turned to look at her. 'Is our cause not virtuous? Gan is convinced he'll become an ally, and so am I.'

'Maybe *virtuous* was the wrong word. Maybe… too *proud* to help us. But what makes you think he'll be different to Gaochi?'

Boquin turned back to face his note. 'Mingchi's father was a tyrant. His extravagant lifestyle landed Pik in a famine like the rest of the East. Blew all his money so he could host bigger parties with other lords and ladies. First thing Mingchi did after Lord Gaochi passed was denounce his rule and promise to *'de-Gaochify'* Pik. He took down statues of his father, renamed cities names after him. Mingchi's leadership brings a glimmer of hope to many.'

Liqui gave a gentle huff of laughter. 'Boquin, ever the historian. Just sign the blasted letter and attend his coronation. I've also got business near the Hiram precinct; Gan will have my head if I'm late.'

'You don't need to stay, Liqui. You can go tend to your duties.'

Despite his words, Liqui sidled closer, hovering over Boquin's shoulder. 'Your handwriting is beautiful,' she noted softly.

His mind elsewhere, he removed the ink pen from his ear and signed it with sweeping strokes before sealing it with their mark.

May your rule be long and just.

With many hopes,

the Yang.

'I wish I could write like you,' Liqui murmured.

'You always know how to make me feel better about my scribbles, Liqui,' he said, missing the longing in her eyes. 'If Gan's waiting for you somewhere, you should get moving.'

'Nah, I enjoy watching you concentrate. Your work always reads like poetry.'

Boquin swivelled back on his chair to face Liqui, his eyebrows rising in amusement. 'Would you risk Gan's ire for my *so-called* poetry?'

'Perhaps. Or perhaps not. I should go, but I'll be back for more poetry, Boquin. Good luck making it through the crowds. I heard Mingchi might give out free boulag rolls and alcohol at the end of his fealty celebration. Light knows why that man made such a decision in the middle of a damn famine. May as well be tossing out free money. You take care now and may the Light guide and protect you.'

'You too, Li. I'll see you around.'

Her footsteps faded into the quiet night, the creak of the sliding door marking her departure. The room was cloaked in dim shadows, save for the lamp light reflecting off his desk. Alone once more, he looked at the letter one last time, nodding with approval at his calligraphy.

There, even if he declines our offer, at least he'll have some nice art to keep.

His chair scraped against the rugged flooring of the room as he stood. With one last glance at the chaos of his desk, Boquin reached behind it and flicked off the switch to his lamp. Darkness surged into the small, square room, consuming every corner save for the faint dark-blue luminescence seeping through the blinds above his desk. The glow from the single window was just bright enough to guide him past bunkbeds and cluttered furniture towards the sliding door.

Outside in the empty corridor, the walls, lined with rough, faded bricks, bore the remnants of once-vibrant graffiti now dulled by dust. Discarded construction materials – bags of cement, metal rods, and trowels – littered the floor. A string of hanging bulbs bathed the narrow corridor in a warm glow, their warm lights guiding Boquin past boarded-up doors. One of the bulbs were flickering. *Gotta remind Gan to bring back a spare.*

A loud squeak made him jump. Turning to the other dead end of the hallway, where the amber lights barely touched, he caught sight of an unusually large sewer rodent struggling to enter a tiny gap. The rat, plump and persistent, kicked and wriggled until it disappeared through the wall.

Pik's famine definitely hasn't reached rodent society.

Boquin reached the end of the short, brick corridor and came to a wall covered in the same faded graffiti. Near the bottom, a square of missing bricks created an opening just big enough for an adult to pass through. He

lay down and crawled into the darkness behind the wall.

He slowly rose to his feet in the pitch-black, steadying himself against the narrow walls as he found his balance. A subtle breeze caressed his face from the front. *That's the direction I gotta go.*

Inching forward, Boquin felt the walls pressing his shoulders, forcing him to angle sideways. He was in a tight walkway between two walls, shimmying in leftward direction. Behind him was Avenue 23/456, and in front, Avenue 43/516. Between these two worlds, Boquin could hear the collective sounds of District Pik – the thrum of music, voices, laughter, and the patter of moving feet. People from either side were travelling to the same destination: Mingchi's coronation. In Kowloon, these events were grand affairs, marking the transfer of power from the former lord to their successor. With no term limits to their rule, coronations were rare, typically occurring only near the end of a lord or lady's lifetime.

Boquin continued carefully to avoid scraping against the abrasive bricks. He caught glimpses of the city through tiny gaps between the bricks, where needle-thin slits of light pierced the darkness, merging the vibrant sounds of Kowloon with fleeting visual snapshots.

'Did you ask for the money? He conveniently keeps forgetting.'

And on the other side…

'I'm gonna bring as many boulag rolls as I can carry home... Ma's starving...'

As Boquin inched left, the gusts that had been buffeting his side now rushed overhead.

Finally. Now I gotta climb. He looked up, but the darkness remained constant.

Pressing his back hard against the wall and pushing off with his legs against the wall in front, Boquin lifted himself off the ground. He took small steps upward, his back scraping against the brick. Boquin was glad the dark robbed him of his sight. Within a few minutes, the climb had him easily ten metres above the walkway, but to his brain, it might as well be just under him.

Soon, Boquin's head hit something solid – wooden planks. They gave way with a gentle push and he shifted them aside to create an opening. With

a grunt, he hoisted himself up, emerging into yet another narrow, pitch-black passage sandwiched between two walls, one floor higher. The vibrant sounds of life were quieter than before.

He continued edging left along the tight walkway until he reached his target: a square metallic panel at the base of the wall, its fastening bolts already removed.

The panel was askew, not quite covering the opening it was meant to conceal – a clear sign of Liqui's hurried departure earlier.

I've gotta tell her to be more careful. It's clumsiness like this that'll blow our cover.

Shaking his head, Boquin applied force to the heavy panel, which was a toilet seat on the other side. With each push, it inched forward until the gap was just wide enough for him to slip through. Now, on the other side, he pushed the heavy, rusted, toilet back to its original position against the grey-brick wall.

He stood up straight, stretched and pulled his mask over his nose. Raising the hood over his head, he looked around to see if the coast was clear.

It was.

Boquin stood in an empty jail cell within a disused prison complex. This was one of many secret Yang quarters scattered across Kambaland, the capital of District Pik. He and four others used this place for sleep, leaving each day to report to the central Yang hub in the heart of the city, where dozens of comrades gathered to meet, plan, and launch daring operations for their cause. But no Yang base was ever permanent; each was prepared to move at a moment's notice. Just a few cycles ago, Gan – the leader of their cell – received a warning from the Central Kowlooni Yangs to relocate all bases following Jian's execution. But they had barely settled for a full menses-cycle, and Gan felt the concerns of the Central Yangs were far too disconnected from the realities of their eastern groups. He refused to move.

Truthfully, this old prison was too perfect to abandon on suspicion alone. The homeless who lived in some of these jail cells cared little for the comings and goings of unfamiliar faces. Questions about the Yangs would only be met with shrugs and disinterested gazes.

Boquin left the cell and ventured down the prison. To his left, a series of cell doors lined the corridor, some locked and some open. Inside were makeshift structures – tarps and tin cobbled together into shanties that housed multiple occupants in a chaotic display of survival ingenuity. Aesthetics didn't matter; items were joined where they fit, and anything that didn't had long since collapsed. Boquin even knew of a three-tiered construction in one cell, each floor just tall enough for someone to crawl around in. The chaotic patchwork spoke volumes about the lives contained within each small space.

During his initial visits, this place had reminded him of a dungeon. However, as time passed on, Boquin's perspective evolved. Now, he marvelled at the makeshift homes and shops that had sprung up in the prison cells. Lanterns adorned the ceiling, casting a warm, inviting glow. Cells with broken locks had metamorphosed into communal areas for shared meals and impromptu get-togethers. Occasionally, the flicker of a poorly functioning entertainment screen would illuminate huddled figures entranced by a zuche game or an old movie. Here, the community of vagrants celebrated the festivals around Kowloon they weren't allowed to attend elsewhere.

Boquin ascended a worn flight of stairs and ventured down another corridor, his observant eyes drinking in his surroundings. Glancing at his handheld computing device, he noted the time: 0800. Lord Mingchi's fealty celebration was already underway. He quickened his pace, disappearing into the bustling depths of Kowloon.

As Boquin finally emerged from the old prison cell complex, there was no clearly marked exit or entrance, only a gradual transition from the secluded prison hallways into the bustling streets of Kambaland. The traces of prison-slum faded away, replaced by the dense population of Pik's citizens.

Outside, the streets teemed with people moving almost shoulder-to-shoulder towards Mingchi's estate. A palpable sense of anticipation electrified the air, making the city feel like one gigantic living organism.

Since the widespread famine, many eastern cities had become ghost towns, their starving inhabitants too weak or unwilling to leave their homes. But with this coronation, the hungry people of Pik clamoured to take part in

the festivities. East Kowloon, known for its spirited celebrations, was in its element. *I wonder how many people are attending just for the free food.*

His stomach gave an involuntary rumble. He had been rationing his meals too much lately. Being a Yang didn't equate with a life of luxury. Perhaps one more akin to a sewer rodent – a testament to Boquin's journey through walls and emergence out of a toilet.

I hope I get the chance to snag a boulag roll.

Caught in the slow ebb of the crowd, Boquin realised he needed to speed up. He let his body unwind, releasing the coiled tension from his muscles. His focus shifted downwards to the moving feet of the crowd around him. He inhaled a deep breath, and then, like a sheh stalking its prey, he began his dance towards the estate.

He barely touched the people coiled around him. He was like water, taking the form of the space it occupied. Boquin was moving forward at least three times faster than the pace of the crowd.

This particular skill, while not ostentatious, had been critical to many of his assignments. If he claimed he had the power to run through crowds as if they didn't exist, people would laugh at him.

'The standards for passing shit as a 'power' have really hit the dirt, huh?' The words still echoed in his ears. In fact, they were the exact words someone had thrown at him long ago, when he was a child…

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'No one has ever pickpocketed me before. Not until fate put me in your crosshairs. But, seeing as I caught you, I'd hardly call that a successful pickpocket.' The tall man's voice resonated within the confines of the square room as he stood over the bound child.

'I told you how I nicked your pants! Can you please just untie me and let me go back to my parents? They're looking for me.'

'That line's not gonna work on me, kid. Just as I'm not used to turning and finding my pockets empty, I think you're not used to getting caught and being tied up in an empty room.' A slow grin spread across the man's face. 'If I remember correctly, my personal record for making it through the Grand Eastern Bazaar is… three minutes? Three minutes thirty? That

was long ago. But you… I counted 50 seconds max. I didn't think it was possible through that many people.'

'You're a fast old fart. No grown-up has ever caught me before.'

The man chuckled. 'Oh, you might be giving me too much credit.' He squatted down to eye-level with the child. 'Kid, I'll let you in on a little secret. I've got powers, too. I can run faster than any man alive.'

'Yeah, right! Powers like those are fake!'

Straightening up, the man lifted his foot and angled it so the child could see the outsole of his boot. He wriggled his toes within the snug confines of the shoe. As he did so, a rubber plate on the bottom toe-side of the boot sprang out a few centimetres before retracting back into place.

The child's eyes widened under the dim light.

'That tiny spring kicks into action when I take off. The more force I put into my stride, the faster it propels me,' the man explained.

'What do you need that for? Do you get pickpocketed often, mister?'

The man let out a warm laugh in the small room. 'Oh no, nothing like that. I fight bad guys,' he revealed, his voice dropping to a dramatic whisper.

'What!! So, you're like a superhero? Like the Dragons of Yu? Or the Incredible Cheung-Shee from the storybooks?' The child's voice was full of awe now, not a sliver of doubt or derision in him.

The man tensed at the mention of the child having read books. Illiteracy was rife in the East, let alone for someone his age. *Incredible.*

'Well, maybe not quite the *Dragons*. But yeah, something akin to Cheung-Shee. You enjoy these books?'

'Yeah! I read them all the time.' The child's breath quickened with excitement.

'Who taught you to read? Where do you find your books?'

The child remained silent, his eyes drifting to the dimly lit corner of the room as he shifted in his bonds on the floor.

'What's wrong?'

'You won't like me if I tell you. A lot of people already don't like me. And I don't want a superhero to do the same.'

The man frowned. 'Hey, superheroes don't really hate anyone, even the

people they beat up. Trust me. That's what makes them super.'

'Then promise you won't b-beat me up like what Bianfu-Ren does to the bad guys?'

Amusement sparked in the man's eyes. 'Well, I've already caught you breaking the law and I haven't beaten you up yet, have I?'

'That's true I guess… Okay, w-well… I find my books from this place near where I s-sleep,' the child said, darting a glance at the man.

'Find them? Or steal?' the man asked, already knowing the answer.

The child's face coloured.

'Steal…' he whispered. 'I sneak in, snag as many superhero books as I can carry, then bolt back to my corner to read till my eyes fall asleep.'

'And how did you learn to read?' The man asked once again.

'I taught myself, with a little help from Mr Chaqiraku, who makes soup near my place. He shows me the hard words. And since you're a hero… I *have* tried to stop my thieving ways. It's just hard. The books always end with mysteries. I can't wait to find out what happens next.'

'It's rare I come across a thief with a conscience. Why did you try to stop stealing?' the man asked.

The child paused, a frown creasing his youthful face, 'In issue #712, Cheung-Shee caught a person stealing food, but he wasn't even angry at them! He fought the guards chasing them and even let them take more food! But later in the story, they were caught stealing expensive shoes to wear, and Cheung-Shee got so mad at them. He said stealing was okay if it's to survive. But if it was for fun, stealing is wrong. After finding out reading these books counts as fun… I realised he would be upset with me, too. So, I tried to stop, but then I saw the next volume was a crossover with Cheung-Shee and Zhizhu-Ren and I couldn't help myself. I just sort of kept stealing from then on. I guess I do feel bad now I know it's wrong.'

The man stood silent in contemplation. Then, he gave the child a warm smile. 'You're a sweet kid. You've got a good heart. Take it from this superhero; keep stealing and stop feeling guilty. Sometimes, doing bad things to bad people is a good thing. Even if it's not for survival. But try not to do it to ordinary people, people like you or me; they're the real good

people. Protect them instead. Steal from big shops, from people you know are rich. Steal from the authorities; those that protect the rich. They're the bad guys I fight against. The things you'll be stealing are the products of exploitation; they were already yours to begin with. Do you get what I mean?'

The child tilted his head. 'What's that word mean? Esk-poi-tayshen?'

The man chuckled. 'You'll find out when you're older. Or just go ask the soup guy who helps you read. You can go now, kid. I'm not going to ask your name or tell you mine. I have a feeling your pure heart will turn you into a superhero one day, too. Who knows? You may even end up being my sidekick. If that day comes, we'll exchange names then.' The man knelt down to untie the binds.

The child never forgot his first encounter with a real-life superhero.

15

All Hail Lord Mingchi!

Boquin was in Pik's capital of Kambaland, heading swiftly toward Lord Mingchi's estate. He slithered past people at such a speed no one had any chance to react if he bumped into them.

Suddenly, his communication device vibrated in his pocket.

Picking up the rectangular device, he slipped it beneath his hood and to his ear. 'Yes?'

'Bo. Just checking in. How are you holding up? Almost at the estate?'

'Everything's okay. Almost there.'

There was a pause at the other end of the line. When Gan spoke again, his voice had an edge of steel. 'This isn't just another mission, Boquin. It's a big one. If we're successful, it may change everything for us.'

Boquin acknowledged Gan's words with a nod. 'I understand. Tell me again why Gajan couldn't just do this on his own? Isn't he stationed inside? He can slide this letter under Mingchi's door whenever he wants.'

'We can't risk compromising Gajan as one of the estate Kuishi. Under no circumstances can he be linked back to the Yang; his position is far too vital. That's why it's gotta be you. No one else can make it inside.'

'Yeah, but why now? His entire estate is locked down. Any other day would've been easier.'

'They brushed off our last two letters as pranks, Bo. But imagine this: we interrupt his coronation speech, slip the letter right into his hands, and

snatch the audience's attention for just a moment. The entire district will be buzzing about the mysterious figure who disrupted Mingchi's flowering and then vanished. After that, let's see the royal runt *try* to ignore our message. And oh, when you meet Gajan, give the lad a bit of reassurance. He's still finding his feet in all this.'

'Of course, Gan. I'll get it done.'

'You've come a long way, Bo. Breaking into the estate is no walk in the north, but I know you can do this.'

Gan's faith in him swelled like a beacon of warmth. He was more than just a superior – he was a mentor, a guide, and a paternal figure in Boquin's life where he lacked a biological one.

'Thank you, Gan. I won't let us down.'

'I know you won't. Remember, Bo. You're never alone. Even inside that estate, Gajan will do everything he can to help. Our brothers and sisters will be in the audience looking out for you. I'll let you go now, son. Good luck.'

As the call ended with a soft buzz, Boquin felt a surge of determination. He was prepared for whatever lay ahead. He was ready to deliver the letter to Mingchi.

Drums rolled, and notes drifting from flutes danced through the air. Signature musical styles of East Kowloon, a region steeped in tradition and history, resonated around the streets of Mingchi's ancestral home. His estate spanned from level fifty to sixty-five atop a groundscraper dedicated to Pik nobles.

The nostalgia-inducing melodies of *Eastern Beauty, Dong's Honeyed Prophecy* and *The Lord's Rebirth* flowed through the air, a symphony of eastern folk songs that tugged at the heartstrings. This coronation seemed to have breathed new life into the easterners, something Boquin thought had been snuffed out by the famine over the past five annui-cycles.

Between the tall, fortress-like estate and the surrounding groundscrapers was an enormous gap, plunging a full hundred metres down to the teeming streets below. None of the groundscrapers physically connected to the estate except for thick plumbing pipes.

Standing on the sixtieth floor, Mingchi had already started his address. Thousands of his citizens gathered on every level of the surrounding groundscrapers. They sat with their legs dangling over the edge of the upper open-air levels of these buildings, taking in an unobstructed view of the entire estate. Others stood shoulder to shoulder, arms linked in a tight-knit display of unity. Faces craned upwards, eager to glimpse their new leader standing on the estate balcony. Bellies rumbled but they all remained steadfast, listening to his words for the food that would come after.

Boquin was on the 45th floor of one of the surrounding groundscrapers, looking up through a window at the crowds from the lower vantage point. He couldn't see Pik's new lord as he was giving his speech from the other side of the estate.

As Boquin stared out into the world, the crowd moved behind him in a blur, everyone rushing to make it to the upper floors for a better view. The dim glow coming through the window accentuated his dark features. In his black clothing, he blended seamlessly into the dark corner he found himself in. Taking in one final look at the crowd over his shoulder, he pushed out the window and climbed through it.

He found his footing on a large sewage pipe that stretched across the ten-metre chasm all the way to the estate. Pitted and brown with rust, its centre was strewn with debris from above. Beyond it, the estate's imposing structure loomed large.

Groundscraper Huabi. The whole structure is dedicated to Pik's governors and upper-class. Only accessible from the ground. But now, we have our own entry.

A square blue construction tarp was affixed just above the junction to the grey stone wall of Lord Mingchi's estate.

Behind that should be my way inside. You better have done your part, Gajan!

With his heart pounding in his chest, Boquin inched along the sewage pipe, carefully placing his steps on discarded cans, plastic bottles, crumpled papers, and other scattered debris. Mingchi's voice echoed from above, bouncing off the towering groundscrapers that encircled the estate.

Reaching the end of his precarious path, Boquin lifted the tarp and saw a

narrow but deep crack in the wall going right through to the other side. It was barely a palm and a half wide, and about Boquin's height – not much, considering easterners' shorter statures. He peered through it, seeing only darkness on the other side.

'Hey, Gajan?' Boquin called out through the crack. 'Are you there?'

There was no response. *Damn it, he should be waiting for me. And this crack... does he think I have the waist of a skinny, little schoolgirl?*

Boquin took a deep breath and slipped behind the tarp, sucking in his stomach and chest as far as they would go. He turned sideways and slid his left shoulder and arm through the opening.

I hate travelling through walls all the time. Boquin turned his head outwards, preferring a view of his escape route rather than the forbidding darkness within. He managed to fit his left leg in, shoving it through the gap and scraping his thigh painfully as he inched forward. Suddenly, dust between the crack tickled his nose, triggering a sudden cough that forced out the breath he had been holding. His stomach expanded instantly, his chest erupting in pain, and he found himself wedged tight half-way through the crack.

'Light, this is embarrassing.'

Using his right leg for leverage and his left for propulsion, he tried to jostle himself free, but to no avail. At least he wasn't claustrophobic. That would have made the situation far worse.

Out of nowhere, a chuckle emanated from the shadows beyond the wall. Someone was in the room. Boquin's heart pounded in his chest as he stilled his body, his head still pinned, facing the outside.

His alarm intensified when a solid grip enclosed his left wrist, the unexpected contact sending jolts of terror through his body. Instinctively, Boquin flailed his arms to shake off the hold.

'Psst, calm down! It's me! Gajan! I'm trying to pull you through! Should've made the gap wider. I thought the girl was going to deliver the message, not you!'

A wave of relief washed over Boquin. 'Oh, thank the Light. Quick, pull my arm while I try to push from my side! Having trouble breathing!'

Gajan's hands closed around Boquin's wrist once more. As Gajan heaved, Boquin pushed, leveraging the force of his legs to dislodge himself. Pain radiated through his ribs, and his arm felt like it was going to pop out of its socket. He bit back a cry, teeth clenching, muscles straining, until, suddenly, he burst free. The momentum sent both men tumbling onto the cold stone floor, a cloud of dust billowing up around them in the dim blue light that filtered through the tarp.

'Are you fucking *stupid?!*' Boquin groused as he stood up, a fiery throb pulsing through his torso. 'Even Liqui would have struggled to get through… that! The crack of my ass is wider!' He looked back at the gap, hands on the back of his head.

'I'm sorry!' Gajan said as he sat on the ground, rubbing his elbow. 'I just couldn't risk someone walking into the cellar and noticing my work. I've already raised a few eyebrows with my frequent visits down here. Maybe if I'd used a sharper chisel…'

Boquin's anger faded when he heard Gajan's reasoning. Recalling Gan's request to look out for him, he lent a hand to the young Yang recruit. 'Fair enough. I suppose the important thing is you managed to do it at all.'

Gajan nodded and took the hand, rising to his feet. His gaze now held a glimmer of curiosity. 'Why couldn't I have delivered the message myself? After the coronation, I mean.'

'Gan thinks it has to be done during the coronation. To ensure it's read. He also doesn't want you risking your position here in the estate.' As he spoke, Boquin brushed off the lingering dust from Gajan's shoulders and arms. 'What's the situation?'

'It's quiet upstairs,' Gajan said. 'Most of his men are on the streets, prepped for the food distribution. You should be able to get close to Mingchi undetected. But remember, the balcony he's on is off-limits to everyone, even the Kuishi, so it's going to take some guile on your part to get up there.'

'Thanks for the help. Now strip and wait here. I'll return and escape through the crack if things go smoothly. If they don't, grab your spare clothes and disappear. I'll do the same.'

'But… I didn't pack any,' Gajan admitted.

'Then it looks like you might have to run home in your underwear,' Boquin quipped. 'Hurry, brother. Hand me your uniform; we don't have much time.'

Gajan swiftly undressed, handing Boquin his coat, shirt, and trousers. The uniform wasn't the standard Kuishi attire Boquin was used to seeing on the streets. It was a ceremonial uniform, reserved for special occasions. A reminder of the time when grand ceremonies, festivals and street carnivals weren't as rare. It was a tad ostentatious for his taste, but if it served the purpose and got him closer to that coveted balcony, it was worth it.

'What's the fastest way to the balcony?' Boquin asked as he fit his arms into the coat, the ceremonial uniform fitting snugly around his form. He still wore his black shirt with the loose collar underneath the uniform. He'd still need to wear his mask once he's on the balcony. It also had the letter in its pocket.

'As soon as you take the stairs out of the cellar, find the lift at the end of the hallway. It only goes up to the eighth floor. Once there, make a left and enter the first door you see. That should lead you to a lounge, and then to a spiral staircase. Climb until you come across a brown door. That'll be your gateway to the balcony.'

'Got it. How should I get back?'

'After you've handed Mingchi the letter, head to the opposite end of the balcony. You'll find a door leading to the fire exits. They're usually locked from the outside, but they're always accessible from the balconies. Go down as far as you can and walk straight until you find the cellar stairs. Oh, and here,' Gajan removed his ceremonial beret, a black feather bobbing on its front. Boquin accepted it with a nod and adjusted it on his head. The beret was the final piece of the disguise. Now Boquin was ready for whatever awaited him. Gajan stood there, shifting from foot to foot and shivering.

'Hey, you don't actually have to run home in your underwear. I was just joking earlier. If things go bad, or even if they don't, you can always throw on my clothes. They're warm.

Gajan shrugged. 'I should be fine. But thanks.'

'I insist. We can just change clothes once I'm back.'

'All right,' Gajan conceded. 'If I get cold, I'll put them on. Good luck up

there, Boquin.'

'Stay hidden,' Boquin instructed in a serious tone. 'May the Light guard and protect you.'

'May it guard and protect you too.'

Turning away from Gajan, Boquin moved towards the other end of the room. Barrels huddled in the surroundings, their wooden bodies smelling of aged alcohol. Some barrels dripped from their tap, as if recently emptied.

Must be for the festivities.

As he reached the base of the ascending stairs, he cast one last look back at Gajan and exchanged a nod. Then, steadying his resolve, he began to climb.

The hallway at the top was a sea of muted tones, the carpet beneath his boots plush, the walls plain and weathered. Boquin turned over Gajan's instructions in his mind, navigating through the maze-like passages until he came upon the lift. He pressed the call button, and it hummed into motion.

Hopefully, the new guard excuse works.

Ding.

The lift was thankfully empty. He stepped in and punched the button for the highest accessible floor, and it started moving. His fingers fiddled with the loose mask around his neck, the fabric smooth and cool against his skin.

After the lift glided to a stop at the highest level, it slid open to reveal a lone guard on the other side. Boquin's heart stilled, but he schooled his features into an impassive facade, avoiding eye contact. From the edge of his vision, he could make out the distinctive feathered beret atop the guard's head. Boquin moved out of the lift, his movements unhurried, and as the other guard stepped in, the doors slid closed.

His heart pounded a steady rhythm against his ribs as he moved away from the lift, the encounter with the guard replaying in his mind.

I'm okay, he reassured himself. *I've got a disguise on.*

Recalling the next set of instructions from Gajan, Boquin came upon the first door on his right, its stained-opaque glass rattling in its weathered wooden frame from the commotion inside.

Pop!

'Aye! There we go!'

The effervescent pop of a bottle of Shangpinchou punctuated the muted hum of voices inside, which rose in a chorus of cheers and applause. Mingchi's speech resonated through the live broadcast of the Eastern Times, the national news network of Pik. Music also wafted through the gap underneath the door, hinting at it being a private party on the other side.

Through the frosted glass, Boquin could make out the silhouettes of half a dozen guards huddled around a lounging area on the left, and a small bar on the right side of the room. He needed to get through this room.

With a deep, steadying breath, Boquin pushed open the door and stepped inside, his shoulders back and his head high. He immediately noticed a single closed door at the other side of the lounge. *The stairs to the balcony!*

Boquin walked behind the polished tabletop, passing the grand shelves stacked with expensive spirits and other alcoholic beverages as he headed towards the door.

Suddenly, a voice pierced the buoyant hum of conversations. A guard from the lounge had noticed him, his words somewhat slurred by the Shangpinchou. 'Hey brother, where're you goin'?'

'Just to the door,' Boquin muttered, careful to keep his face away from the curious Kuishi.

But the guard was persistent and a little tipsy. 'But them's the stairs to the balcony. We're not supposed to go up there until Lord Mingchi gets back! Come here, share a drink with us.'

'That's okay. If I'm not allowed to go up, I'll just leave for now. Thanks for sparing me from embarrassment in front of the Lord.'

'You sure you don't want some Shangpinchou? We've been saving this up for a long-ass time, man! We got bottles to go around!'

With every invite, Boquin felt the threads of his disguise straining, threatening to unravel his covert mission.

'Yeah, come here!' called out a second Kuishi. 'We're gonna start playing gokm very soon. Everyone's coming up. It'll be a big game!'

A third voice called out too, waving Boquin to join them. *Fuck their card games. Today is the wrong day for the Kuishi to become so hospitable.*

'I'm good, thank you. Our lord gave me a few tasks to do, so I aim to stay

sober a while longer.'

Remaining silent, Boquin retreated towards the entrance with deliberate slowness to reduce suspicion. As he opened the door inwards and let it block him, the Kuishi turned back to their conversations, no longer focused on him. *Good.*

Seizing the moment, he let the door creak shut to imply his departure, and then in one swift motion, he slid backwards and ducked behind the counter.

As Boquin crouched low, watching the guards intently, jovial conversations and laughter resumed with a toast and the clatter of glasses. He crept to the other side of the counter, the door leading to the balcony stairs just a few metres ahead. But it was in the line of sight of the celebrating Kuishi. He needed a distraction that would pull their focus away from his path.

Suddenly, fortune intervened in the form of a guard from the lounge. 'Listen to this part of the speech, everyone. It's my favourite bit!' he slurred.

'And how long must the east suffer from the prejudice of the rest of the world? When we travel to the west, to the core, the north, they laugh and ridicule us! They call us lazy, degenerate criminals; for centuries we have borne the title of dongfa'shu! Famine may have made us smaller, but we are still large at heart...'

The broadcast volume was turned up, and all conversations stopped as they tuned in to the speech. This was it; the distraction Boquin had been seeking.

Like a shadow skittering along the edge of someone's vision, Boquin moved towards the door. He turned the knob, easing it open with a soft sound.

Squeeak, krthump.

A rush of cool, stale air greeted him in the stairwell. With a sigh of relief, Boquin began the steep climb up the spiral staircase. Somewhere above would be a brown door, and on the other side of that was Mingchi, who had the attention of everyone in Pik.

Time was his enemy now, chasing at his heels like a relentless hound. Boquin launched himself up the stairs faster. His mission would be for nought if Mingchi finished his speech and moved back inside his estate.

The brown door. It was a brown door he was seeking. Just one door.

Damn Gan and his dramatic ideas! Gajan could have just given him this lousy letter any other time!

As Boquin drew nearer to the top, Mingchi's powerful voice resonated down the staircase.

'Pik will be a beautiful state, worthy of the respect of even the northern rulers. Help me wash out the filth that covers our streets! Help me restore Dong's name in the minds and hearts of our children once more, and I will be the ruler my father never was! A ruler Pik deserves!'

A pang of regret filled Boquin. He wished he could drink in every word of the speech and absorb Mingchi's vision of transforming Pik. He yearned to understand how the young lord planned to eradicate the deep-rooted issues that plagued the east. Corruption, disease, poverty, societal moral laxity, everything Boquin thought wrong with his home.

Boquin had reluctantly accepted that he might never see the east rise from its ruins. He knew the odds of achieving the Yang dream, living on the surface under God's Light, were slim, at least within his lifetime. Yet, Mingchi's impassioned speech rekindled a spark of hope within him. Perhaps he could yet see Pik transform into something better than the world he was born into.

Boquin stopped, huffing and puffing, in front of the brown door. Drawing a deep breath, he adjusted his mask and pulled it up to its rightful place. His hand, steady despite his nerves, clasped the doorknob and turned it.

It opened, and harsh light from the outside forced him to squint. Bright lights and lamps were dotted around the banister and spotlights shone into the balcony. He pulled the beret down to shade his eyes. He was now on the balcony, but not on the side Mingchi was.

He must be around the bend.

Boquin looked to his left, drawn towards the vertigo-inducing drop that extended to the ground levels – the daunting stretch he had crossed not long ago. Below and across the gap, crowds huddled together, their eyes fixed on an enormous LED screen mounted on the estate's groundscraper walls, broadcasting a live feed of Mingchi delivering his speech. They sat

on windowsills, on top of railings, some even perched on AC units jutting out of walls, taking in the speech from all four sides of the building.

Suddenly, Boquin heard a surge of cheers rising from the crowd. Onlookers waved, their faces lit with excitement, clapping, whistling and cheering as they spotted Boquin. Maybe the crowds assumed he was someone else important, or the infectious spirit of the gathering had simply taken over, making any change in the atmosphere reason to whoop and cheer. The anticipation for the free food ahead had revived everyone's spirits.

With purpose in his strides, Boquin navigated the length of the balcony and rounded the sharp corner. He could see Mingchi up ahead, basking in the adoration of the audience and delivering his passionate speech a mere ten metres away. There were two Kuishi on either side of him, standing and facing the crowd. The scene was one of rapt attention, with hundreds of eyes glued to the young ruler. Boquin reached into his Kuishi coat for the letter, then focused on a singular point: Mingchi.

The letter in his hand felt heavier than ever, but he moved swiftly, an ominous shadow against the light-drenched backdrop of the balcony.

The guard closest to Boquin, on Mingchi's left, was the first to notice him. A flicker of confusion crossed the guard's face as Boquin did not slow down. Instinctively, the guard's hand moved to the pistol at his hip, while he raised his other arm to halt Boquin.

Despite the guard's shout and commanding gesture to stop, Boquin sped up to a run. As he reached arm's length, he snatched the guard's arm and yanked him forward, pivoting smoothly around his back. In an instant, Boquin was between the guard and Lord Mingchi.

Mingchi, startled mid-speech, turned just in time to see Boquin in front of him, wide-eyed with surprise.

'Why are you—'

Boquin slipped the letter into Mingchi's hand, but the guard at the young lord's right drew his sword and tried grabbing him. Boquin ducked under the other guard's arm, sidestepped him, and sprinted towards the far end of the balcony.

Only someone with Boquin's agility could have executed this delicate

sequence of movements.

Gajan's instructions had been correct; there was indeed a fire exit there. Boquin could hear the two guards pounding after him. But then something unexpected – the voice of Mingchi calling them back.

Now Boquin understood the need to deliver the letter during the coronation. Mingchi was more concerned with the decorum of the ceremony than pursuing a harmless messenger delivering a letter.

As he plunged through the emergency exit, Boquin felt a rush of adrenaline and relief. His mission was complete. Mingchi had the letter and would no doubt read it. And Light willing, the Pik Yangs might win a crucial ally. Boquin's heart thumped in sync with the pounding of his boots echoing down the barren staircase.

Back in the storage room, Gajan sat atop a stool near the crack, still in his underwear. He sprang to his feet at Boquin's entrance.

'Did you do it? Does he have the letter?'

'Yeah, told you. It wasn't too bad, and no one really tried to chase me. Really expected Mingchi to dispatch the estate after me.' Boquin swiftly unbuttoned his coat and stepped out of the guard's uniform.

'Well, it's good he hasn't taken an official stance on the Yangs yet,' Gajan said. 'I'm sure he knew it was us the moment he saw the letter.' The young Yang initiate's eyes gleamed with something akin to hope.

A reflective silence enveloped the room as Boquin handed the uniform back. 'Maybe Gan was right,' he said. 'I think he'll give us a shot. The southern Yangs have made a lot of progress toward swaying public opinion, so now it's our turn to do the same.'

Gajan's face split into a grin, 'This is so exciting! I haven't even been with you guys for too long and already I feel like I'm a part of an important turning point for the eastern clusters. We'll be so much better than those Yangs in the southern districts. Since they carried out the bombings, they've forgotten diplomacy comes before violence.'

'For sure, Gajan. We can start to be an example for those heretics. You did well here today. Be proud of yourself. We may not be the largest of Yang clusters, but if we're made up of brave soldiers like you, the Yaozhis better

watch out.' Boquin reached out and patted Gajan's shoulder.

'Thank you. Mingchi has it in him to understand our cause, I just *know* it. I've felt it up close.'

Gajan had a spark in his eye. Boquin could hear his willingness to fight in the tone of his voice. *Was this the same spark Gan says he saw in me all those years ago?*

'Will you be going back to Gan?' Gajan asked.

'Probably, but I—' A deafening roar from outside abruptly silenced Boquin.

'What the hell is that commotion?' Gajan's eyes were wide as he looked toward the cracked concrete wall separating them from the outside. They had just finished dressing in their original attire.

A sense of foreboding gnawing at his gut, Boquin approached the crack and reached through to shift the tarp aside. Pressing his eye to the opening, he tried to discern the nature of the chaos above. All he could see was a blur of frantic activity on the upper balconies.

'Nothing good. I best get going,' Boquin said, still looking out the crack.

'Good idea, I should go up and join the guards. They might need help. I'll see you soon, Boquin.' Flashing a brief smile, Gajan took off, his boots pounding against the stairs.

The roaring continued, escalating in intensity. It was clear now that these were the voices of the crowds that had gathered to hear Mingchi's speech. But now, their cheers had morphed into screams… a chilling symphony of chaos and fear. Boquin hurried as he squeezed into the crack, immediately cursing himself for forgetting to ask Gajan to push him through. And just as before, he became stuck halfway, behind the blue-tinted shadows of the tarp. Sticking his arm outside, he waved the tarp aside once more and looked up at the surrounding groundscrapers to see what was happening more clearly.

Four bodies plummeted to the ground above Boquin, their screams tearing through the thick, humid air like ragged cloth as they fell from the railing-less balconies of the surrounding groundscrapers. Above, people were stampeding in one direction. He could hear Mingchi beseeching the crowd for order.

'Everyone! Please, there is enough food for everyone present! Don't panic! Don't

push! Please!'

But his voice was a mere pinprick of light in a storm, drowned out in the furious current of anarchy and madness. Boquin now knew the stampeding chaos because of people's desperation to get the food and drinks Mingchi's guards had started handing out. His good deed had taken a devastating turn.

Another body fell off a higher balcony, zipping down Boquin's line of sight. Unadulterated panic seized Boquin, propelling him to writhe and twist out the unforgiving grip of the crack. In a burst of frustration, he seized the tarp and yanked it down, ripping it from the wall as the open air hit Boquin. It was filled with a terrifying crescendo of screams from above. Summoning all his strength, Boquin pushed forward, scraping his robes and skin against the walls. His shoulders squeezed through the gap with a painful shift, and at last, he broke free, quickly steadying himself before he could lose his balance over the pipe and down into the alleys below.

Light, guide my step. After the brief prayer, he rushed over the wide sewer pipe that connected the estate to the groundscraper opposite.

Suddenly from above, another body slammed into the rusted sewage pipe Boquin was balancing on, the metallic clank muffled by the sickening crunch of breaking bones. The pipe shuddered beneath his feet, causing his heart to leap into his throat. Boquin swayed his outstretched arms from side to side as he battled to remain balanced. The unfortunate soul, whose back had shattered on impact, began an agonisingly slow slide down the pipe before plummeting into the grim abyss of Pik's ground level. Not even a final scream left the mouth of the lifeless human-turned-rag doll.

Not wasting a moment, Boquin picked up the pace, leapt over the grotesque dent left in the pipe and plunged back through the window of the massive groundscraper he had entered from earlier.

For now, he was safe. But even amidst his success, the morbid turn of the coronation lay heavy upon him. And beneath it all, the gnawing hunger in his stomach reminded him of the reality he lived in.

Pik was beyond salvation and Kowloon a sinking boat no amount of bailing could save. His previous optimism brought on by the young lord's speech, vibrant and resilient, now seemed as fragile as glass under the

crushing weight of this reality.

The only truth was the Yang. And their truth was Dong's final revelation: God had abandoned Kowloon. Salvation lay in their exodus to the surface.

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With eyes heavy with tears, Boquin pressed his ink-pen on his journal's page:

Long ago did the rodent fall,
Down a well where he was forgotten by all.
Climbs turned to falls on slick stone walls,
Seasons passed, and the world above stopped its call.
The pit became his kingdom, the shallow waters his throne,
A world of one, where he ruled alone.
Until one day, the water splashes and stirs,
A second rodent drops, its fur a foreign blur.
'I come from above, from sewers vast and wide!
Where rivers twist into seas, and thousands of our brothers thrive,'
But the rodent king scoffed, dismissing the lie.
Yet the traveller urged, 'This place is a grave,
Stay here too long, and you'll die as its slave.'
The rodent king knew what escape could mean:
'Who'd respect a crown from lands never seen?
What's heaven without God? A Kingdom without its king?
If I ascend these walls, where will echoes of my worship sing?'
The king shuddered, a new fear as deep as his hole,
He killed the traveller, forever silencing his hidden goal.
And alone the rodent king remained,
Guarding his nothing for no one to invade.

16

Kowloon Walled City

'Approaching the hour, is it not?'

'Indeed, my Lord Emperor,' Zexu replied, his eyes not straying from the heap of files in his hands. 'A mere five minutes remaining until he will call. From what I gathered, it's still early in their work cycle. Did you know it's only eight hours long?'

Puyin's brows furrowed, his fingers playing thoughtfully with his sleek, dark goatee. 'I would've if that man allowed me to ask more questions. I hope this meeting is more balanced. A discussion, rather than me feeling like I'm fielding a barrage of questions.'

Anticipation of the impending meeting hung in the air. Emperor Puyin sat resolute and ready, yearning for a dialogue that would benefit his people and realm.

'It was only the second meeting,' Zexu reassured him. 'Besides, we spent most of it trying to get the translation programmes to work. I find it interesting how far our Yue language has evolved independently from theirs. Don't you? Completely unintelligible, yet we would've spoken the same language when Kowloon separated from the surface and sank, over a thousand annui-cycles ago.' Zexu's gaze lifted from the files, meeting the Emperor's stare.

'It doesn't surprise me,' the Emperor said. 'Even here, fringe districts have developed dialects that others can barely understand. Some of the deep

southern dialects are alien to me, and the eastern accent…' He trailed off, a mild grimace forming at the thought. 'Well, it still grinds my eardrums—'

Puyin stopped, his face softening. 'My apologies, I forgot you are a native of Pik. But I've always admired how well you mask your eastern accent.'

Zexu laughed off the faux pas, waving a dismissive hand. 'Think nothing of it, my Emperor. I consider myself more of a central Kowlooni than an easterner.'

'And thank the Light for that. Your assistance and guidance are invaluable, Zexu,' Puyin said, hand on heart. ' One thing more, do you still believe the surface dwellers will attempt to send covert informants down here?'

'Your Majesty, if you stumbled upon an uncharted realm beneath your own, with millions upon millions of people, loaded with resources, armies, weapons, and cityscapes spanning hundreds of kilometres, wouldn't you want to see it for yourself? Curiosity alone would drive anyone to investigate. You wouldn't ask for permission.'

Puyin mulled over Zexu's words. It was a logical argument, one that struck an unpleasant chord within him. 'General Cao has taken the Ditu and secured key outposts leading into Kowloon. Surely there is no chance any outsider could enter now.' He avoided Zexu's gaze, unwilling to hint at the creeping worry that was settling within him.

The chancellor's voice was steady. 'My Emperor, their leader chose to contact us on *his* terms when *he* was ready. He could've waited until he had more knowledge of us before he made his first move. They could be in our midst as we speak.'

Emperor Puyin clenched his fists against the armrests. 'What could they possibly accomplish? What are some of the things they may attempt? Would they move against the dynasty?'

Zexu tapped his fingers rhythmically against the file he held. 'There are countless possibilities. They could choose to coexist with us as friendly neighbours. They might desire our resources, eyeing the wealth we've accumulated over the years. Or, worst of all, they could misinterpret our intentions and see us as a threat that needs to be neutralised. That would be called "pre-emptive defence", a military strategy mentioned by Dong. He

wrote about how the ancient Romans used this tactic to carry themselves to great heights.'

Puyin pursed his lips, well aware of Dong's admiration for ancient Rome's surface civilisation. He shuddered at the thought of the mysterious surface leader possessing even half the guile and ambition of a mythical Roman emperor.

'Invading foreign lands to seize their resources… we Yaozhi are familiar with such tactics. Remember the centuries-long drilling Emperor Han ordered beneath the Huang Wildlands? After Prophet Dong's death, his apostles tried to shut down our mines, but my family never fully obeyed… What if this is Dong's way of punishing my family, Zexu?'

'I beg you not to entertain such notions, my Emperor. Nothing has been confirmed. If Dong ever intervenes, it would always be to benefit the kingdom he loved, not harm it. Dong is Kowloon's champion, not theirs.'

Puyin's lips were pressed into a thin line.

The holotable blinked blue, and both Zexu and the Emperor froze, staring at it.

'Well, pick it up!' Emperor Puyin snapped.

'At once.' Zexu placed the folders onto the corner of the holotable, then swiped his hand over the table's luminescent surface. The holographic display sparkled into action, casting an aquamarine sheen across the room. A single audio wave appeared across the display, dancing with the transmission of sound.

Emperor Puyin watched in silence. He felt a surge of nervous energy coursing through him, but he pushed it aside and leaned forward.

'Hello?' The voice, garbled and distorted, broke through the ambient static. 'Am I addressing Emperor Yaozhi Puyin?'

'Yes, this is Emperor Puyin speaking.' He hoped his voice sounded more assured than he felt.

'Good. Sounds like the translation plug-ins have learned a lot more since our last meeting. Your speech is making a lot more sense in my Cantonese.'

Even through the poor-quality transmission, Puyin could sense the man's determination, making him aware of his own nerves. *Can he tell how uneasy*

I'm feeling? What if he takes it for weakness? Puyin's fingers tightened unconsciously around the edge of his seat.

'Yes, Sir Hwa-Chee. I can understand you better now; it's a very intuitive programme. Did it learn our speech just by listening to us?'

'That's correct, Emperor. It was designed to facilitate communication between two mutually unintelligible languages that share a common ancestral proto-language. It uses a form of deep learning to decipher and correlate the meaning of words by identifying parallels between our Cantonese and your Yue. Since our languages diverged 1,000 years ago, many vestiges of our speech remain in yours. The software has effectively bridged the linguistic gap and stitched the commonalities together for effective translation.'

Emperor Puyin was in awe at such technology. He imagined it was only a sliver of the surface's scientific wealth. 'I'm impressed, sir. I trust my chancellor's detailed report about Kowloon reached you. We understand and respect your cautious approach.'

'Indeed, Emperor Puyin, Chancellor Zexu's efforts are appreciated. After examining the report, I have several questions. I look forward to learning more about your realm and people.'

Taking his chance, Puyin interjected. 'Before we proceed, Sir Hwa-Chee, I would like to clarify something. May I reciprocate your enquiries with questions of my own? I felt somewhat short-changed during our last interaction as I have a strong desire to learn about the surface world.'

'Of course, Emperor. Once you address my questions, I'll be happy to answer yours. I apologise for any imbalances when we last talked.'

Puyin responded with a grateful nod. 'Thank you, sir. Please proceed with your questions.' He glanced at Zexu, who was engrossed in the hypnotic dance of the audio waves on the holotable, jotting down notes.

Without missing a beat, Sir Hwa-Chee asked his first question. 'You estimate a population size of 868.5 million within your 66-district jurisdiction, with a median age of just 20. But I've noticed you couldn't give an accurate figure on the populations of the deep south of Kowloon. The region you call the 'Huang Wildlands.' Why is this?'

Puyin exhaled slowly, not knowing where to start. 'That southern stretch of our world is… complicated. The Wildlands are chaotic and ungoverned, vast mazes of towering structures that are unmapped by any of our official instruments. We don't know how far south these lands extend, as their people continue to excavate into the walls and ground to accommodate their growing populations. Their society is largely tribal, and their people follow barbaric practices, with no religion, law, or morality guiding them.'

'Do the people of this region outnumber Kowloon?'

'I doubt that, but their population density is higher. However, we have some data on the Wildtowns that border South Kowloon. They were a part of the Dynasty until recently.'

'Yes, the 11 southern districts that gained independence after the District Rebellions. Tell me more about that.'

'28 annui-cycles ago, the south led the largest separatist movement in Kowlooni history, with support from several Eastern states. 11 southern districts succeeded and dissolved into the Huang Wildlands, while we brokered a difficult peace with the rest. There isn't much else to it.' Puyin's tone was blunt. This was an embarrassing event in Kowloon's recent memory and not something he was excited to share with an outsider.

'It's rarely so straightforward, Emperor Puyin. I am no stranger to conflict; people do not seek independence without reason. Why did South Kowloon want to break away after thousands of years of unity?'

Puyin sighed, realising he had no choice but to delve into a history he wished to forget. 'It was a time of shifting sands and fickle allegiances. My father, Emperor Guangxu, sought to close the cultural divide between the south and the rest of Kowloon. He wished to be *the* Emperor who ended the age-old enmity, our dynasty's most troubled subjects. By law, the Emperor holds absolute authority over every district, yet we rarely meddle in their internal affairs. Emperor Guangxu changed that and invited himself to the southern political table every chance he got. Their warlords and politicians did not take it kindly.'

'But how did his involvement create a war? Did he do something specific to anger them?'

'Emperor Guangxu was well aware of the south's growing resentment towards him. Around the same time, a southern district called Borek Ata began aggressively arming and mobilising large gangster forces, claiming they were seeing increased raids from the Huang Wildlands. But this move violated an ancient disarmament treaty signed by the south. Every southern district has a cap for militants, and District Borek Ata was far exceeding theirs.'

'Why is there a limit on southern militants? Do other districts have the same limit?' Hwa-Chee asked.

'In the old era many centuries ago, South Kowloon was wild and untamed, driven by conquest and war. They once held control of vast swathes of the Huang Wildlands and came close to launching full-scale war against the dynasty multiple times throughout history. It took a long and bloody conflict to finally subdue them. Afterwards, the dynasty pushed South Kowloon to sign the *Southern Truce Treatise,* which imposed strict limits on their military. No other region in Kowloon ever posed such a threat to the dynasty, so no other faced such harsh restrictions.'

'Hm. Okay. So while Emperor Guangxu began involving himself in southern politics, District Borek Ata was seemingly breaking the terms of disarmament. How did your father react?'

'Emperor Guangxu assumed they were preparing to violently resist his recent interferences. He reacted harshly and ordered a royal regicide against Borek Ata's warlady.'

'Royal regicide? What's that?' Hwa-Chee asked.

Emperor Puyin was careful with the words he chose. 'Kowlooni Emperors have the power to create or remove the kings of Kowloon. That's why the gangsters of the Yaozhi dynasty are called the Kingmakers. If a troublesome lord or lady needs replacing, the Emperor calls forth a royal regicide – a calculated political assassination to replace them with more loyal successor. One such regicide was called against Lady Shangguan of District Borek Ata. My father thought it was a matter of pre-empting an inevitable attack.'

'So, did the Emperor's regicide against her fail?'

'Not at all. Regicides are our secret weapon; we've rarely failed to execute

one. It's the period that follows that's tricky. After the Emperor got rid of Lady Shangguan, the transition was turbulent. Borek Ata's people rejected their new warlord, seeing him as a puppet of the Yaozhi dynasty. A revolt erupted, and it soon spread across the south. They first demanded release from the Southern Truce Treatise. When that was denied, they became angrier and added another demand: release from the Unification Pact – the contract binding all the districts under the Yaozhi Dynasty. War was declared after that. After Emperor Guangxu's untimely passing, it fell upon me to clean up his mess. My reign began amidst the turmoil of his exhausted war.'

A moment of quiet passed. 'How is your relationship with the south now?' Hwa-Chee asked.

'It… has been strained. South Kowloon has always favoured isolation over assimilation. For hundreds of generations, they have rejected foreign influence and remained resentful towards us Yaozhi. The rebellions made everything worse. I have spent many cycles studying the shortcomings of my father so that I do not repeat them.'

Another moment of quiet came. Puyin could feel Hwa-Chee's gaze through the device, along with his unspoken questions and judgement. It was the quiet analysis of a strategist and leader, of a man weighing and measuring history and culture, seeking to piece together the puzzle of Kowloon.

'So,' the surface dweller finally said, 'The rebellions ended with the secession of 11 southern districts into the Wildlands. It's hard to fathom such a grand empire shrinking so violently. Managing the remaining 868.5 million Kowloonis must still be a challenge. Especially feeding them all. I imagine there are abundant food sources in Kowloon.'

'We can't feed all Kowloonis, Sir Hwa-Chee.' Puyin leaned back into his throne. 'For the last few centuries, at any given time, at least five per cent of our population has lived without food security. However, currently, that number is closer to fifteen per cent. Much of East Kowloon has succumbed to famine. We're working on the situation.'

Hwa-Chee hesitated briefly before pressing on again. 'The east? Your

chancellor's report made it out to be a very troubled region. Historic poverty, lowest literacy rates of all five areas. If they're also enduring the worst food shortages… dare I say the east looks a bit… neglected?'

'I take offence at that insinuation, sir. We have never neglected the east. If they're living in a sorry state, it's because of their own doing, not ours. Easterners have a tendency to create problems out of thin air. In the middle era, they were vassal states for the north for 300 annui-cycles, where they were run by the wealthiest businesspeople in Kowloon. Yet, even with this advantage, they could achieve nothing for themselves. When the vassal agreement expired, the easterners fell deeper into poverty.

'My father always said that those who don't know how to use an advantage once in their hands were never truly deserving of the rewards it could've brought. We've given them everything, and still they remain in pathetic circumstances. Even in the recent Rebellions, East Kowloon chose to side with the southern separatists despite having no reason to do so. Simply to sow chaos and disturb the natural order.'

'I suppose it's your business how you govern, not mine,' Hwa-Chee replied. 'And what about energy? I can't begin to imagine the power needed to maintain your empire.'

'There are chambers of immense heat in certain regions of Kowloon, which we convert into electrical energy. But with my Zhaisheng initiative, we're exploring a new frontier – quantum energy. By harnessing quantum reactions, we aim to generate the vast amounts of energy we need to power our society.'

'*Zhaisheng*,' Hwa-Chee echoed, almost tasting the word. 'I recall a mention of this word in the chancellor's report. I understood it as the name for Kowloon's ongoing renaissance?'

Puyin's eyes shone at the prospect of discussing this. 'Yes, it is time for a second rebirth of Kowloon's rich past. Our greatest Yaozhi, Emperor Hongwu, was the first to introduce and execute the idea. I will be the second. Just like him, I will motivate the brilliant minds of Kowloon to bring back art, music, science and mathematics to the forefront of culture. The Zhaisheng's success will be felt by every district. Already, its early

benefits are obvious. The pursuit of higher education is more prevalent than ever in our history. Cities are beginning to see a rise in employment. North and West Kowloon are experiencing a surge in prosperity.'

'Indeed, such prosperity!' Hwa-Chee noted, his tone carrying a slight undercurrent of sarcasm. 'Yet, I couldn't help but notice you avoided mentioning the south and east, regions you earlier confessed were struggling under the yoke of alienation and famine. When will your Zhaisheng reach them?'

The question was blunt, the message between the lines once again insinuating negligence on Puyin's behalf.

The Emperor's countenance stiffened, an edge creeping into his voice. 'I would remind you, sir, that this discussion is to provide insight into Kowloon, not serve as a platform to question my leadership.'

'I was just asking a question, but fair enough,' Hwa-Chee conceded. 'What piques my interest, though, is the sustained presence of Christianity among Kowloon's population. How did that transpire, I wonder?'

'Christianity was one of the main religions that was standardised during Kowloon's formation, which is why it has endured as one of the dominant faiths. But Christians have not been the majority for centuries now.'

'Ah, yes, there is another dominant religion in Kowloon; *Dongism*, right? And there's a revered figure called Dong. Do you worship him? Is he like Jesus, or is he merely a prophet?'

'We regard Dong as an enlightened being who ascended to a divine level of spirituality. His transformative efforts propelled Kowloon to convert from Christianity. He was the one who made Emperor Hongwu's Zhaisheng possible, established the dynasty's Mandate of Heaven and shifted our culture and identity. His teachings provide ethical guidelines for us. But we don't worship him. It's sinful to worship a mortal man, no different from worshipping idols. There is also little emphasis on worshipping a singular creator. Instead, we venerate the manifestation of an unknowable god – His Light. Dong was the first to acknowledge that the Light on the surface is the holiest, and it's our responsibility to learn from his wisdom so we can one day return there. When God forgives Kowloon, he will deliver us from

darkness, back to the surface.'

'Why did Dong believe you needed forgiveness?' Hwa-Chee asked, genuine curiosity in his voice.

'When Kowloon existed on the surface, we were a morally corrupt city. God saw us unfit to be in his sight, where we were bathed in his Holy Light. We believe he sent his Demiurge as punishment, who cracked the earth and condemned us to darkness. We call this event The Great Sinking. Dong promised a way out if we sought redemption.'

'Indeed, quite intriguing,' Hwa-Chee conceded. 'Looking at my notes here, I notice you've provided an estimated count of your military personnel. How critical is the role of your military forces? Are inter-district conflicts so rampant that such a substantial force is necessary? The numbers are truly staggering. For instance, 'District Kam Shan' is listed as having over 1,000,000 personnel!'

'Yes, having such vast militaries is vital, Sir Hwa-Chee. We've just come out of a major global conflict. Whatever our equivalent for "global" is, anyway. The District Rebellions I mentioned earlier is but one of many major armed conflicts throughout history. The ancient wars between the Yaozhi's and south Kowloon lasted for decades. Regardless of the full-scale conflicts, there are no shortages of internal security threats. Crime is all too common, and it takes an army to patrol Kowloon's millions of streets.'

'That makes sense,' Hwa-Chee said. 'I referred to your armed forces as "military personnel", but your chancellor often used the terms "gangs" and "gangsters", which I found puzzling. I'm still attempting to grasp this particular linguistic nuance. Are you criminals? Or law enforcers?'

Puyin chuckled at the query. 'A good question. The word "gangster" has lost its original meaning for us. Every district in Kowloon was once the territory of criminal gangs. Before the Great Sinking, the Yu Family gangsters unified all the major gangs that controlled territories across Kowloon. We criminals learned to govern Kowloon far better than any legal governments that came before us. We gave out dole money, built schools and hospitals, paid subsidies for crucial businesses, and provided social services like housing. We succeeded where the law failed and continued to

call ourselves gangsters to honour our origins. Now the word means family rather than lawlessness.' Puyin flicked his fingers towards Zexu, indicating he needed a glass of water. His mouth was as dry as a fungal sponge.

'An ironic name to give yourselves when I assume there are actual criminal gangs in Kowloon. It must get confusing, to have an origin in the same type of people you are no doubt locking up now.'

Puyin forced a laugh, interpreting the comment as an attempt at levity. He accepted a cup of ice-cold water from Zexu and took a refreshing sip.

'I have one last question,' Hwa-Chee said in a rush. 'When was the last time you and your people attempted to reach the surface?'

Puyin blinked in surprise, taken aback by the enquiry. 'I beg your pardon?'

'Was the question too complicated? Then let me be more specific. How long ago since the last Kowlooni made it to Hong Kong?'

'I'm still a little confused, sir,' Puyin replied. 'Your assumption makes no sense to me. Why would you think we have tried to reach there at all?'

'You believe Dong did it, right? The story of Dong is that he reached the surface without any maps. So, it isn't out of the question that others can reach us, too.'

'Dong's journey is regarded as a miracle… it wouldn't be possible for anyone else without the Ditu.'

'Are you telling me the truth, Emperor Puyin?'

What an absurd question? Puyin frowned in confusion. 'Of course! Your existence was a total surprise to us,' he boomed earnestly.

'Very well. Thank you, Emperor. Those are all my questions for the time being. If you have any queries for me, now would be the appropriate time to ask.'

Puyin took a deep breath, trying to move past the strange line of questioning. The enormity of his curiosity outweighed his apprehension.

'What's the surface like?' Puyin asked.

'Strange question… how do I describe the only place I have ever known? I suppose there would be a few differences between here and down there. Today, it is quite warm. Our carbon dioxide releases have been acting up as of late and need servicing. It is very *light* (sunny), with few clouds in the

blue (sky).'

'The blue?' Puyin asked. 'What's the blue?'

'I didn't say blue. I said it was in the *blue* (sky). Maybe the word doesn't exist in your vocabulary. *Makes sense.* Anyways, I also took a stroll with my daughter and our dog across a field near our house. Do fields or grass exist in Kowloon?'

Puyin let out a bark of laughter. 'If there were open space for a field, it would be claimed by landlords to construct as many 80-storey groundscrapers as possible. And as for grass, I'm afraid I'm unfamiliar. What is it?'

'Imagine it as a plant, cultivated for its appearance rather than any real use. It yields a soft and green carpet to tread or run on, kept trimmed to a few centimetres. When there are large swaths of it, punctuated by a few trees, it's a beautiful sight.'

'I can't even imagine such a space. It sounds like moss is the closest we have to grass. I wonder, though, are there other civilisations on the surface? Outside Hong Kong? During Dong's time, he wrote about the entire surface being covered with kingdoms.'

'Hong Kong is one of the smaller nations. It wasn't always so small. Rising oceans meant many coastal cities had to be scaled down. There are many nations stronger than us – Dravida Eelam, Zhongguo, Reformed Muscovya, American-Judea, and the First Nations of Africa. Hong Kong is modest, and many consider it to be one of the most beautiful cities on the *Kowloon* (planet).'

'Kowloon? I think the translation software is glitching again,' Puyin said.

'That's quite all right,' Hwa-Chee replied, the casual ease in his voice doing little to pacify Puyin's disquiet. 'I believe this is an appropriate place to conclude our conversation. We can reconnect within the next ten work-cycles of Kowloon, if that suits you, Emperor?'

'Yes, it does, Sir Hwa-Chee,' Puyin agreed reluctantly. There were still so many unanswered questions, now relegated to the back of his mind until their next discussion. 'Until our next meeting. Farewell for now.'

The holotable's lights flickered momentarily before dimming. The call

had concluded. From his silent vigil at the corner of the table, Zexu seemed frozen in the wake of the enlightening exchange. Puyin let out a deep, weary sigh.

'Chancellor, please call my brother. I need to speak with Denzhen at once.'

****

The tower's mess hall hummed with the usual clatter of plates and the rhythmic click of chopsticks, but Baoyan sat alone at a corner table, his thoughts distant from the idle chatter around him. The tragic news from Pik had reached him an hour ago. Lord Mingchi's much-anticipated coronation, meant to mark a hopeful new chapter for the region, had descended into bloody chaos. Baoyan couldn't shake the image of the city's streets littered with the bodies of those trampled in the desperate stampede for food. How many were lying there now, crushed or already dead? At least his immediate family lived in Yu now, thanks to his position as a Kingmaker.

Lost in his thoughts, he caught the scent of burning mushrooms from the table grill in front of him. He plucked the blackened fungi with his chopsticks, dropping them onto his plate. From the table behind him, the raucous laughter of a nearby group of high-ranking tribunes and legates, pulled him from his thoughts.

'Who remembers the final scene from *Chief Bobo 3*?'

'When the rodent army comes stampeding?'

'Yeah, remind you of anything?'

Another round of laughter erupted from the table. *The hell are they joking about,* Baoyan thought. *It better not be about...*

'Oh, hah! The coronation really *did* look like the ending of Chief Bobo 3. You can always count on an easterner to live up to their name of dong'fa! Can't even break bread without murdering one another!' one of the Kingmakers sneered. The others grinned, stuffing their faces without a care, as if it were the funniest thing they'd heard all day. Baoyan's grip tightened on his chopsticks. East Kowloon was often a target of mockery in the tower, but this was outright bigotry.

I might be the only easterner Kingmaker, but I still exist! Baoyan twisted around to face the table.

'You all…' His voice wasn't loud, but it was enough to interrupt the conversation. The entire length of the table fell silent as they turned to look at the short, pale, spiky-haired centurion, who shot to his feet with clenched fists.

'You all don't get it… none of you understand,' Baoyan's words were heavy. 'While the rest of Kowloon has been celebrating the end of the rebellions, it never really ended for us, did it? But you wouldn't know, no one does. Because this godforsaken tower would sooner let 11 districts secede from the *fucking* Unification Pact before allowing another Easterner in here!'

The mess hall went deathly quiet. Baoyan's words reached every corner, and heads turned to see the confrontation. His heart pounded and his jaw trembled uncontrollably, but he kept his gaze steady, locking eyes with every Kingmaker at the table who had been mocking his people.

'Looks like Chief Bobo found his voice,' a voice jeered near the end of the table, followed by laughter from the table. It was Tribune Jiuquan. Baoyan opened his mouth to reply, but the words stuck in his throat as the tribune leaned in, his smirk twisting into something more menacing.

'We don't let easterners in easy because you dong'fa make shit Kingmakers. I mean, try regiciding a lord with four rodents! All they have to do is pull up cheese and four spring traps,' he chuckled, nudging the Kingmakers on either side, who snickered in response. 'Your new peasant Lord, Chief Bobo…' Jiuquan pushed himself to his feet, '… is a lost cause.' The tribune's rank, two above Baoyan's, separated them by at least a decade of experience and training. His cold stare bore into Baoyan, forcing the centurion to drop his gaze. 'Your district, a lost cause.' His words were like daggers, each one tearing at Baoyan's fraying resolve. 'Your vermin people, a lost cause! And the *whole* east, a—'

'ENOUGH!'

A sudden, heavy slam from a nearby table echoed across from the other end of the hall, rattling plates and silencing the mess. Jiuquan flinched, his head snapping towards the source.

The room fell into a tense silence.

Ushi towered over everyone in the hall, his dark expression set in angry

creases. 'Anyone who thinks it's funny to mock one's home while it rages with flames, stand up now so I can look at your slimy face, too.'

No one stood up. Tribune Jiuquan remained standing, but his shoulders stiffened in response. Ushi focused on him.

Baoyan felt a spark of determination ignite inside him as he looked at this hulking King with admiration. *Isn't that Praefect Ushi? A southerner. Unlike us, his people wear their pride like a shield.*

'Sit back down, Praefect. You're *way* out of line speaking to a superior this way,' Jiuquan firmly said to Ushi.

'Fuck your superior ass, Jiuquan. Don't think I don't know why you and your lackeys get *real* quiet when you speak on the south's name. You see, even though there are only 14 southern Kingmakers in this tower, the moment any of us hear a comment about our home, we'll smack you so hard across the face the bigotry will come leaking out your ears.'

Baoyan watched Ushi, awestruck by the praefect's unwavering defiance against a higher-ranked Kingmaker.

Ushi continued, his voice even more commanding. 'This centurion is the *only* easterner here, so it's no fucking coincidence that all of you have suddenly found the balls to be comedians! So, let this be a warning to anyone who thinks they can insult my eastern brothers and sisters without consequence!' Ushi's gaze swung around the room. 'Just as they've always stood with the south, I will take any insult against the east as an affront to my own home! There isn't one Easterner in the tower anymore, there are fifteen!'

Ushi clenched his fist. 'Anyone want to see if I'm bluffing?!'

The room remained silent. Some turned back to their food, avoiding Ushi's glare. A Kingmaker seated next to Jiuquan yanked him back down to sit. Ushi glanced at Baoyan, who smiled back at him. With a nod, Ushi sat back down beside Praefect Tao and resumed eating.

Baoyan sat down soon after. As the hum of the mess hall slowly returned, the mocking voices had fallen silent, at least for now. He had found an unexpected ally, and Baoyan felt a small ember of strength flicker to life.

The east doesn't have to stand alone. It never did.

17

The Wildland's Mystery

The Yu tower library was a quiet bastion of learning on the second floor, where keen students from across District Yu mingled with Kingmakers in their academic pursuits. Inside a private study room, Yutai and Tao sat in a pair of opposing seats watching the goings-on. Half a dozen of students walked by with their arms stacked with books, others sat behind computer screens, while small groups gathered around tables, engaged in group study.

Tao cocked his head to the side. 'Let me wrap my head around this, brother. You've got a buddy in the Tien Tao who can sneak us into Fort Ho Man Ting? And under the pretence of this "*friendly tour,*" you're gonna install wiretaps?'

'Exactly!' Yutai broke out into a grin. 'We Kingmakers don't belong on a bench, waiting to be tagged in. You and me? We're both *mighty* Kings, but it's easy for us to get overshadowed by our best friends. Shing's one of the best sharpshooters in the praefect cohort, and Ushi could probably outlift everyone in the tower. It's no coincidence they're both on the field and we aren't.'

'It's not all bad being benched, brother. You get to stretch your legs. Watch the game with a clearer head than those playing.'

'You also watch your teammates get pummelled while you're powerless to do anything. I *hate* being powerless,' Yutai shot back, his voice sharpening.

'Keung isn't entirely convinced the Tien Tao have turned against us; that was clear from the meeting. Surely you can also see why we have to do this? We can bring him the proof he needs to move against Warlord Xianjian immediately! Then; royal regicide the motherfucker.'

Tao let out a low whistle, leaning back in his chair, hands folded behind his head. 'But we'd be going against orders. If we fail, we could mess up more than just Keung's plan.' He paused for a moment, a spark of curiosity in his eyes. 'Who's this Tien Tao friend of yours, anyway? Never thought I'd see a Rioter be friends with a King…'

'Name's Hung. We go way back to when we were kids in District Sung Wong. We both dreamed of being Kingmakers, but his family fell on hard times when we were about 12. His family left Central Kowloon to migrate south, where life is cheaper. But he never gave up his dream of becoming an elite gangster. He might've missed his chance to become a Kingmaker, but he didn't settle for joining some local, no-name gang, oh no. He got into The Tien *fucking* Tao!' Yutai pointed to himself, nodding with pride. 'Only one of my boys would be capable of that.'

'Remember, brother. We're still not sure which side the Rioters are on. This Hung sounds like some child you once knew. Down there will be a man who's lived most of his life in the south.'

'You're not wrong, but I've kept in contact with him over the years. We're not completely estranged. Trust me, Tao. As far as Hung goes, we're good.'

'My gut tells me otherwise, but I'll trust you. Don't make me regret not dissuading you from this.'

'Thank you, you won't. Let me give him a call.'

Yutai took a deep breath and swiped the surface of his holocommunicator. After three tones, someone answered.

'Light Illumine.'

'Brother! Light Illumine! It's Yutai. How've you been?'

'Yutai?' Hung replied with hesitation. 'I'm all right, you? It's been… a while since you called.'

He spoke with the characteristic lilt of a southern Kowlooni, his the words spilling out in a quick, rhythmic pattern. But the regional dialect, known to

be almost unintelligible in its purest form in the deep south, was devoid of any enthusiasm or warmth.

'Sorry about that, brother. You know how it is. Danger's our currency, and we're all busy entrepreneurs. I'm calling about that tour we talked about a while back. I've got a friend here who's a total history buff. Knows every detail about the background of Fort Ho Man Ting. I mentioned your name, and now he's jumping over groundscrapers with excitement. What do you think? Can we make it happen?' Yutai glanced at Tao, who was shaking his head at the cover story.

'I mentioned that tour like, what… four annui-cycles ago? It's a bit short notice, don't you think? And is your friend a Kingmaker too?'

Tao quirked an eyebrow at Yutai, a silent question in his gaze.

'Uh, yes, he is. Praefect, like me. So, is today a no-go? Just thought it'd be nice for us to drop by the South on our free day,' Yutai replied, his gaze steady on the device.

'I don't think so. Another time?'

'Hung, come on buddy. Aren't you a hot shot amongst the Rioters? Surely you can make time for us? We might not get another chance. Who knows when we'll even talk again as we are now… things are so dire nowadays, Light knows neither of us might not have another tomorrow.'

Tao rolled his eyes at Yutai's dramatic monologue.

'I can't make any promises… but I'll check. Things are heating up here, you know… with the Yang and all. Can't disclose much over the line. But I'll get back to you in an hour. Sound good?'

'Perfect. Don't want to pass the opportunity up, you know? Not everyone can get a sneak peek into the headquarters of the Tien Tao Rioters!'

'Okay. I'll call you back. Light Illumine.'

'Light Illumine, brother,' Yutai replied as the holographic device flickered and went quiet.

'Well,' Yutai murmured thoughtfully. 'I hope he can manage something for us. We have less than 100-cycles to finish the Yang. It would be a shame to lose this chance.'

'He didn't sound too keen,' Tao pointed out. 'How close were you two

again?'

'Cut him some slack, brother. He's a Tien Tao dealing with the Yang tension in his homeland, which also happens to be the southern capital. Its a Yang hotbed. I'd say he's just under pressure.'

'Fair enough,' Tao conceded, stretching his arms. 'What's the plan now? Not much to do around the tower; all the centurion classes are on right now. And the central districts are dead after the dimming.'

'For someone as laid back as you, maybe,' Yutai teased. 'If you know where to look, the core districts actually have some of the most thriving clubs in Kowloon. But I think the post-dimming life isn't quite your scene. Have you ever visited Gweimin restaurant? In District Tsim Tsui.'

'Can't say I've heard of it; I haven't been to Tsim Tsui in ages. I could eat, though.'

'It's in the lavish Hong Yuen courts, under martial law for the pleasure of southern nobles, high-ranking Tsui gangsters, and celebrated rebel veterans.'

'Could we at least take off our gear before going? They hate us down there, and no one tries to hide it. Makes me feel beyond uncomfortable. Like they're getting ready to pounce.'

'Brother, are you for real?' Yutai said with a frown. 'We get stared at everywhere else, too. What's a few more eyes down south? We're not meant to fear anyone in Kowloon. I'm not taking off my trench coat for anyone, and you better not either!'

Tao shrugged, looking away. 'What makes Gweimin any good? I was never a huge fan of southern cuisine, anyway.'

'Oh, you're gonna love *this* place,' Yutai explained. 'The whole joint is a living homage to the southern rebels during the District Rebellions. Everything from the benches and tables, to the servers, and the food you eat, relates to the war. Think of it like a history museum that spent *way* too much of its budget on the cafeteria. A wax museum with a pulse. Clever marketing, right?'

'That *does* sound intriguing. Lead the way then,' Tao said.

Yutai and Tao, adjusting their holsters and coat, exited the library and headed towards the lifts, intent on reaching the docking ports. On the 15th

floor, Yutai and Tao waited in a short queue of Kingmakers to get on their carriage.

As the rail arrived, Tao, Yutai, and six other Kingmakers boarded. Soft, serene white lights bathed the carriage, creating a warm cocoon against the darkened world rushing past outside. They skimmed between immense groundscrapers, traversing the gulf of space some 50 or 60 levels above the ground. Dim orbs of light periodically dashed past the windows, the guiding lamps of the rail system.

The other Kingmakers, some standing and other seated, were headed to different areas of Kowloon. By the third stop, the duo were alone in the carriage as they sped towards District Tsim Tsui.

Yutai looked up at Tao, who was silently scrolling through the Kowlooni Network on his holocommunicator. 'I can't imagine how we Kings got around before the rails.'

'We had AT-bikes,' Tao said, continuing his absent-minded scrolling.

Yutai rolled his eyes. 'I know, Tao; I was being rhetorical. But seriously, when you think about it, it must've been a real hassle. If we were Kingmakers back then, this journey would've taken us seven work-cycles. Some people say it's why we struggled so much against the south during the rebellions.'

'Are you still being rhetorical or are you asking for my opinion?'

'I'm just asking, Tao. Lighten up a bit, will you?' Yutai frowned. He wasn't close to Tao, unlike Ushi, and knew it would take time to adjust to his character.

'Hmm,' Tao murmured, finally pulling his gaze from his holocommunicator. He paused before speaking. 'Yeah, I'd agree with that. We couldn't mobilise effectively with the front lines so far away. The southern rebels knew their territory inside out – they were everywhere, hitting us hard with guerilla tactics. By the time we sent in gangsters, new orders were already coming in to redeploy. The bikes we used to move around were unfit for southern streets. It was a losing battle from the start.'

'Do you think we could've turned the tide if we'd had the King rails sooner?' Yutai asked.

Tao gave a thoughtful hum, his gaze distant. 'Winning and losing isn't

simple in war. We didn't exactly lose, as we succeeded in putting a stop to the conflict, and the Yaozhi dynasty still stands. However, we can't claim victory either. We lost many southern districts to the Wildlands, suffered heavy casualties, and the peace terms favoured the rebels. But to answer your question,' he paused before continuing. 'No. A single, well-placed explosive could demolish the rail, severing our transportation lifeline to almost half of Kowloon.'

'Why haven't the Yangs already attempted this, then?' Yutai queried, curious.

'They would if they could,' Tao replied frankly. 'However, the map of the King rail tracks criss-crossing Kowloon is a carefully guarded secret. Consider where these tracks have been built. Most of them are situated inside the inaccessible crevices between groundscrapers. The sections exposed to the public have been purposely positioned in some of the most populated areas of Kowloon. Any attempt to destroy the rail would require a powerful explosive, which would result in countless civilian casualties. Fortunately for us, most of today's Yangs still value human life, particularly since they operate within their home districts. But during a full-blown war? It's a different story when you're in a district that isn't home. Perhaps these rails will be blown the moment the next war starts.'

'Wait a minute, hold on,' Yutai interjected, a frown creasing his face. 'Did you say the rail sections cutting through heavy civilian traffic were designed that way? The unfortunate few who can't dodge an oncoming carriage in time, their fates were factored into calculation of its construction?'

Tao gave a grim nod. 'It's a harsh reality, but the other options were far worse. By using civilians as collateral, it's assured us security for the most efficient transportation network we've ever constructed.'

'So they're just… our human shields, then? I'd always thought it was an unavoidable consequence, but to now learn it's intentional…' His voice trailed off, a guilty expression creeping into his gaze. 'It makes me feel like I'm partially to blame for the deaths.'

He recalled the ever-present specs of blood at the front of every King rail carriage. The Kingmakers washed the exterior of the carriages regularly,

but some marks never came off.

Yutai studied Tao, who looked his usual serene self, while his own enthusiasm had been killed by the unsettling revelation. He couldn't say his teammate's acceptance of the rail system's grim reality surprised him. Nothing ever phased Tao. Not because he was cruel or unfeeling, but because he didn't invest himself in emotional concerns he had no control over.

In fact, Yutai thought Tao was a unique Kingmaker; he was born to a noble family of Dongist sages from District Tsin Wai. Despite breaking from tradition and becoming a Kingmaker, Tao remained loyal to his faith, which explained his fascination with southern culture, where his religion was born. Dongism had originated in the south, and the prophet Dong was a pure-blooded southerner. Many of Dongism's traditions, adhered to by Kowloon's majority, had their roots in South Kowlooni culture. This connection made Tao particularly sensitive to the brutal reputation the Kingmakers had earned after their violence in the south during the rebellions. Tao was one of the few non-Southern Kingmaker in the tower who acknowledged how the Yaozhi Dynasty has treated South Kowloon throughout history, and it was one of the reasons why he and Ushi got along so well. That's why Yutai knew this trip to Gweimin Restaurant would interest him.

A sudden jolt rocked the carriage, sending a bolt of alarm through Yutai. His eyes darted left and right, tensing his shoulders. Sensing the distress, Tao blinked open his eyes. 'Relax, Yutai. That wasn't a person. We're still navigating through the spaces between the buildings. The congested pedestrian zones start only once we exit the core districts.'

Silence claimed Yutai's tongue. He laid his wrist on his lap, activated his holocommunicator and dived into the bustling world of the Kowlooni Network. Keying in the address for the Central Times News, article after article competed for his attention.

"Coronation Catastrophe in Pik: Thousands Dead as Lord Mingchi Takes the Throne, Public Doubts His Leadership Over Late Lord Gaochi."

"Rapper DaoTaoFengi Charged With Murder: Music Career In Limbo."

Suddenly, a dazzling rush of light flooded the carriage's interior, tearing

Yutai away from the digital tangle of news articles. They had exited the shadowy confines of the core districts and were now threading through the heart of the outer southern cities. A knot of dread coiled his stomach as he acknowledged the chilling reality: in the minutes that followed, lives might be snuffed out in their heedless pursuit of a meal.

'There's something about these carriages that seems to always kill conversations,' Yutai said, breaking the stretch of silence.

'Huh?' Tao queried.

'Well, it's almost like an unspoken rule that these carriage rides are the perfect time for silence,' he elaborated.

'Whatever conversation-killing magic these carriages possess, it hasn't worked on you yet,' Tao muttered. His eyes shut as his head stayed reclined.

'Hah. Funny. What I'm saying is that I don't know all that much about you.'

'You wouldn't be the first. But maybe if you spent less time with Shing and more with the rest of the detachment, that might change,' Tao suggested, his words carrying mild reproach.

'Well, that's a bit rich coming from you,' Yutai said, bristling at the unexpected criticism. 'I'm easily the most sociable among us all. *You're* the one who never talks, too shy to even contribute to team meetings!' Yutai's voice took on a harsh edge, but he immediately felt a pang of guilt for his sharp words. Before he could voice an apology, Tao sat up and met Yutai's gaze.

'No, you're right,' he conceded. 'I could do better too. Forgive me. We're brothers; I shouldn't have said that to you.'

A flush of shame swept over Yutai as Tao beat him to the apology he was only starting to consider making.

The rest of the ride was quiet.

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'"Rebel's Spleen?"' Tao burst out, his eyebrows shooting up into the hairline of his long, curly, tied-back hair. 'I can't tell if this place is mocking the victims of the district wars or trying to honour them,' he added as they sat in the cosy, dimly lit restaurant.

Across the small table, Yutai said, 'The Rebel's Spleen dish is all right but overrated. I recommend the Wildland's Mystery instead.'

'What's the mystery?' Tao squinted at the fine print of the menu under the dim but steady lamplight.

'Creamed rump with a side of northern-farmed mushrooms,' Yutai replied. 'It's an altered version of a real delicacy from the Huang Wildlands. Here, read the history behind the dish.' His finger tapped a few lines below, drawing Tao's gaze to a chunk of text.

Tao dutifully lifted the menu and scanned the small characters as he read aloud,

'The Wildland's Mystery is a humble peasant dish, once prepared in the deep trenches of the Huang Wildlands by rebels fighting on the front lines. The dish, which was previously unheard of in Kowloon, started popping up as lunch and dinner for the Kowlooni gangsters fighting *against* the rebels. To this day, no one knows how the recipe made its way into the hands of the enemy combatants of the southern rebels, but it serves as a reminder that delicious food knows nothing of borders or conflict.'

'Huh. Interesting. I'll get that with a can of Shyou-Shuya. You?' Tao asked Yutai, pushing the menu aside.

'Me? I'm getting the gourmet MRE. Meal-Ready-to-Eat. Pure wartime grub. I've been meaning to try it out for a while now.'

The restaurant was a memorial to the region's brutal, bloody past and to the rebels who had fought against the tyrant emperor, Yaozhi Guangxu.

The two Kingmakers were sitting in a cosy booth on the right side of the restaurant. Its crimson upholstery had an intricate pattern that made it look like dripping blood. Along the walls were physical reminders of the rebellions: battle-worn rifles, laser spitters, mines, each a puzzle piece of the recent civil war.

In the middle of the dining area, taking pride of place, was a mothballed, twin-barrelled anti-ATB cannon. It was an anachronism, a relic from a time of lawlessness and brutality. Its once fearsome, imposing presence was muted now, which added to the eerie charm of the restaurant.

Yutai felt the eyes of the other patrons boring into his back and heard

their resentful whispers, but he didn't react. Even the staff, weaving their way between tables and patrons, seemed to speed past their booth.

The Kingmaker gang had led the war against the rebels this place memorialised, and the memory hadn't yet faded. Ghosts of the past lingered, stirring up old grudges and trauma.

Tao signalled to a passing server dressed as a southern rebel. She briefly narrowed her eyes before heading their way. Her outfit, complete with a sweatband, dark leather armour, and a short cape, was striking.

'Good evening, Kingmakers. What'll you have?' There was a cold edge to her politeness, a tangible resentment. With a holopad in hand, she prepared to take their orders, seemingly unfazed by their Kingmaker uniform.

'The gourmet MRE for me,' Yutai said. 'With a can of Shyou and some sliced fuju mushrooms, if you please.'

Next to him, Tao chimed in, 'I'll try the Wildland's Mystery dish. With a can of Shyou as well.'

The server punched in their orders with brisk efficiency.

'Is that all?'

'For now,' Yutai handed her their menus. She strode away, grumbling in an unfamiliar southern dialect, her movements stiff and jerky.

'Yikes, I don't remember customer service being this bad,' Yutai exclaimed.

'When was the last time you came here?' Tao asked.

'When I became an aux-Centurion.'

'Ah. So you had no trench coat.'

Yutai pursed his lips and looked away.

The hushed atmosphere of the restaurant felt heavy, each murmur and clink of utensils amplified in the quiet expanse. Yutai wondered what topics he could discuss here. Anything to do with the Yang or the surface was off the table. In the Hong Yuen courts, nestled deep in Tsim Tsui's city of Sarisberi, the influence of the Yangs ran deep like a subterranean river. Discussing their work would be like playing with fire. And here they were, seated in a restaurant that stood as a monument to the rebellions, the birthplace of the very Yangs they were pursuing. The irony wasn't lost on Yutai.

'Did you notice the mural on the opposite wall, Yutai? It's a tribute to the

1236 A.T. 633 eastern demonstration. Ever heard of it?'

Yutai turned in his seat. A vivid panorama of history painted in brilliant, hand-oiled dyes covered the wall – young students, their innocence lost in the red stains of blood on their uniforms, defiantly raising their rifles to the sky. From the barrels of their guns waved the flag of the East, its green fabric stamped with a solitary red star. *The flag of Chin Xiao De.*

Yutai turned back to Tao, knowing he was well-versed on the rebellion's history. 'What's the history behind it?'

'Well,' began Tao in a sombre whisper. 'Many don't know the real reason why East Kowloon suddenly joined the District Rebellions and backed the south. That mural is there to make sure southerners don't forget what they suffered in the name of brotherhood. It's about the Po Lam Pak University massacre of 1236, the single event that propelled the East into war against the dynasty.'

'Can you tell me more about the massacre? I've never heard of it.' Yutai said.

Tao let out a deep breath. '28 annui-cycles ago. Shortly after District Borek Ata's regicide in South Kowloon, there was widespread rebellion in the region. In its early stages, Emperor Guangxu imposed crippling economic sanctions on them. Destroyed trade routes and grounded crucial southern companies. It suffocated them at first, but after a while, it looked like they were getting back up on their feet.'

'How come?'

'The Kingmakers suspected East Kowloon was secretly delivering them aid, circumventing the dynasty's southern blockade. These suspicions sparked Emperor Guangxu's fury—'

'Oh yes,' Yutai interjected. 'Guangxu and his infamous short fuse. Stories of his volatile temper are still making the rounds.'

Tao nodded. 'That same short fuse led to a horrifying reaction. In an effort to assert dominance, Guangxu sponsored West Kowlooni gangsters to infiltrate the east and deliver a harsh message. They targeted Po Lam Pak University, the largest and most esteemed institution in East Kowloon. Decimated almost every faculty. Brilliant minds, the intellectual crème de

la crème from all corners of the east converged at Pa Long University, only to have their light cruelly extinguished. It was a brutal demonstration and a reminder that the Kingmakers reigned supreme. Easterners often rue the fact that their current post-war stagnation stems back to that single day when their intellectual future ended in cold blood.'

Yutai's frown softened. 'Tragic.'

'The mural shows how students all over East Kowloon marched in solidarity with the massacre victims. There's a good reason why no one teaches it outside eastern and southern schools. This shit is officially denied by the dynasty.'

Turning back in his seat once more, Yutai felt the anger of the blood-soaked students take on new context. 'How has the truth not come out since?'

Tao shrugged. 'The truth often makes for uncomfortable history. Officially, we claim the east orchestrated the entire massacre as a pretext to enter the conflict, in a gamble for severance from the Unification Pact. That story's worked a bit too well.'

'Well, that's not too far-fetched, right?' Yutai pondered aloud. 'I mean, this level of villainy from the Kingmakers borders on caricature, conspiracy. Is there any proof the massacre happened as it's told? Even if it did, who's to say the Emperor had a hand in it? It could've been a plot cooked up by the western districts themselves.'

Tao's tone took a sharper edge, his normally quiet voice picking up tempo in a rare show of emotion. 'Just think about it logically, Yutai. Why would disciplined militants from West Kowloon venture hundreds of kilometre's beyond their home and into the east, simply to shoot up a bunch of defenceless scholars and then wash their hands of the situation? The western districts don't stick their necks out unless the Kings give the order, especially when it risks sparking off a war. The Western Reaches have always begged for direction from the dynasty.'

Yutai conceded that Tao had a point, even as he saw the uncharacteristic intensity in his teammate's eyes. It was clear this was a topic close to his heart. 'I won't question the legitimacy of the events any further. We've

left deep scars there. I don't need to be a historian to feel the hate that follows me whenever I'm in the east…' He glanced at the other patrons in the restaurant. 'Or even here in the south.'

Yutai's gaze moved back to the mural again. He felt like he couldn't tear his eyes off them. The students in bloodied school uniforms waving their makeshift weapons now appeared to be the embodiment of rebellion.

A southern restaurant honouring an eastern tragedy. Two regions bound by struggle.

'And the blood on their uniforms isn't a metaphor, either,' Tao added. 'As soon as the news about the university's massacre spread within the east, countless students abandoned their classes and took to the streets in solidarity, armed with anything they could find. Their mission: to hunt down any central or western gangster they thought responsible. But they were just kids, angry and untrained in combat. No match for the Kingmakers at their border. It was a total bloodbath. I've spoken to some Legates who were there. The east lost even more of its future that day. That's when they officially declared war against the Yaozhis and allied with the south.'

With each new detail about the mural, Yutai felt it come alive more. These weren't just students on strike; they were martyrs and casualties of a conflict that few Kingmakers ever mentioned, painstakingly painted by the people who had never forgotten their help.

A knot formed in Yutai's stomach, a mix of shame and guilt for the legacy of his Kingmaker profession.

Tao gestured to a phrase etched in elegant, curling southern Kowlooni script at the top of the mural. 'Read that.'

'I… uh, can't really read southern script,' Yutai said, flushing.

'Oh, right. It says: *On my body, blood is painted, on the day Dong looked away. How could we ever be the same?*'

'Light…' Yutai murmured, the words settling like a weight in his chest. 'I'm surprised you ever agreed to become a Kingmaker. You seem to have a low opinion of us. I mean, makes sense, if you knew about this shit.'

'I didn't want to. This trench coat is heavy on my shoulders. I hate how it's transformed me into the enemy of a people I do not hate,' Tao said, glancing

over his shoulder and noticing cold eyes meeting his own.

Yutai frowned. 'But you could've still refused. It wasn't like the Kingmakers conscripted you.'

'You're right; it was my choice. Being a King is just a means to an end for me. It isn't lost on me just how powerful we are.' Tao's voice held a certain resignation, revealing the conflict that had etched itself deep in his heart.

'So, what? You joined for the power? That doesn't sound like you; it *can't* be the only reason,' Yutai said.

'Well, why do you think I joined?' Tao asked.

Yutai scratched his chin thoughtfully. 'Honestly, after your tirade against the Kingmakers, I would've pegged you for a reformist type. Maybe you hoped to change the system from the inside, or something. Do as much good as you can.'

'That's a fanciful dream, brother.' Tao chuckled. 'I wish to encourage change from within, but that's not why I joined. I'm on a quest for truth, and only the Kingmakers have the necessary resources for me to take on this quest.'

'And what's this quest, then?'

'It may sound grander than it is, but essentially, I want to uncover the deepest secrets of Dongism. Think of it as my lifelong research project. I believe the religious scriptures we have today differ from the original manuscripts Dong wrote during his pilgrimage to the surface. If I am to live my life as a Dongist, I want to practice the faith Dong preached, not the evolutions and innovations of it since his time.'

'Sounds like a controversial ambition. Is that why your family…'

'Cast me out from the clergy?' Tao finished Yutai's sentence. 'Yes, partly. Don't get me wrong! I consider myself a child of the Light. Nothing else is more important to me. Before joining the Kingmakers, my plan was to succeed my father as Tsin Wai's district sage. But I always wanted to learn more about Dongism. The more I studied, the more fabrications I found in our practices, and my understanding of the religion evolved.'

'What do you mean by fabrications?' Yutai asked.

'Well, did you know there's no writing that says we have to sit on a prayer

plush during prayer?'

Yutai arched a brow. 'That can't be right. There are teachings on its spiritual symbolism; the plush is supposed to symbolise our backbone's connection to the ground that birthed us, Kowloon. My old Dongist tutor used to hit me and my brother if we ever forgot to bring ours to our scripture lessons. I've never seen anyone not use it.'

'It was a practice created by a group of southern Dongists competing with the Christian church 500 annui-cycles ago. You see, Dong and his disciples stood while praying. Everyone did back then. They viewed sitting as lazy, sinful. Fast forward to when parts of Kowloon were still converting from Christianity to Dongism, sometime after Dong passed to the Light. Something both Christian and Dongist practice had in common was weekly congregational prayers. A couple of hours, at least, but it was a familiar practice for new Dongist converts. However, while Christians sat down on their benches to pray to their God, Dongists still had to stand. It sounds silly, but it was a major deterrent. Fresh converts would come back with sore knees and feet, and that would be enough for them to disregard Dongism. So, a group of southern Dongists reinterpreted some Dongist expressions in a wildly different way, and some nonsense was created to maximise comfort during congregational prayer: The prayer plush.'

Yutai's mouth fell open.

'Kinda changes how you look at it all, huh?' Tao said.

'It does. Always thought Dong mentioned the plush somewhere, perhaps a footnote in the scripture. But I'm starting to see what you mean now. You being the son of District Tsin Wai's sage, that all makes so much sense. Truth be told, my own reasons for joining the Kings were much less lofty. I wanted to be cool. Cooler than anyone else,' Yutai confessed with a grin. 'Not that I saw myself as uncool before, but the Kings… they're on a whole different level. The cred, the respect, the chance to learn from the best… I always excelled at school, and the Sung Wong Kingmaker Opportunity Programme offered a rare chance to lift my family to the top of the social ladder. When the offer to join came, it felt like the best thing that could happen to me.'

Their discussion was interrupted by the server hurriedly placing their

food in front of them. As they reached for their chopsticks, Yutai's wrist holocommunicator flashed. Hung was calling. Yutai glanced at Tao, who gestured at him to answer.

'Hey, Hung, what's happening? Any news?' Yutai asked.

'Yes, my officer gave the green light for the tour. But has to be after dimming hours.'

'Of course! We're just having dinner in Tsim Tsui right now, so how about we meet at Ho Man Ting station in just over an hour? It'll be way past the dimming then.'

'That works. I'm looking forward to it, dear friend,' Hung's voice sounded strangely detached, almost making Yutai have second thoughts about his plan.

'Same here, my friend. See you soon.' Yutai tapped his wrist to disconnect.

'Your buddy pulled through, I see. Southern hospitality is truly legendary. Unfortunately for them,' Tao murmured, his mouth full of food.

'What did I tell you? Hung and I are tight. I won't lie. Your earlier scepticism about our childhood bond had me worried. But him calling me his "dear friend" was just the reassurance I needed.'

'I have no idea how you plan to carry this out, but good luck to us, I suppose… Hey, the food is good, thank you. I've got this one, by the way, so you better not touch your wallet.'

18

The Lost Trilogy

You sure you two don't want any food?' Keung asked, slurping up a noodle as he eyed the two Tai Li operatives, Han and Jin. They sat across the table, watching him and Cheng eat in the noise and bustle of the cafe's outdoor seating.

'I'm not a fan of southern food,' Jin said. 'Not spicy enough for my taste.'

Perched on the 50th floor of a groundscraper in Ho Man Ting City, their table was uncomfortably close to a rickety railing that leaned over the edge, worn down by years of passersby leaning against it.

'You're right, Jin. Their dishes are mild,' Cheng added. 'The south's exclusion from the major spice routes during the Jingdi reign caused this. Even when they finally gained access to the central trade routes, it seems those flavours never fully integrated into their cuisine.'

Jin raised an eyebrow at Cheng. 'Regardless,' he shrugged. 'We're accustomed to working on an empty stomach. Helps with focus, like taking an exam with a full bladder. We regulate our energy with a Jules Pill.'

Han reached into his pocket and produced a small white capsule for the Kingmakers to see before popping it into his mouth and washing it down with a sip of water.

'Impressive,' Keung remarked.

'Not really. No offence,' Cheng nodded towards the Tai Li. 'They're still eating, just all at once, with no added weight to their bellies. But it comes

with a nasty trade-off: a gut migraine, forty-five minutes of ten-out-of-ten pain. Forty-five?' Cheng looked at Han. 'That's how long it lasts, right?'

'Correct. We prefer to get it over before the assignment starts,' Han murmured as Jin dropped the pill into his mouth and raised his cup for a sip.

'Well, it makes sense why we don't take them, if the pain's that bad,' Keung observed.

Jin's hand shot to his mouth as he almost spat his water out. With a final gulp, he looked at Keung. 'Was a tummy ache really all that convinced you this pill wasn't worth it?'

Keung looked taken aback. 'What?' he mouthed.

'I'm messing around, sir King,' Jin leaned on the armrest of his seat. 'To be honest, it was almost a deal-breaker for me too. The pain fucking suh—' Jin doubled over, clutching his stomach.

He raised a finger and breathed in. 'It sucks,' he finished with an exhale. Slowly, he eased back into his chair and tried to stretch his body straight.

'We used to use them too,' Cheng added. 'That was until a couple of centuries ago, when a Kingmaker accidentally swallowed a whole canister's worth of Jules Pills. It did… painful things to his organs. Painkillers were completely ineffective. Had to be put down. We stopped the practice soon after but found out they had potential as an effective tool for interrogation.'

Keung noticed Han remained impassive, despite having taken the pill earlier. 'You seem to handle it well. How come?'

'I've been taking it longer than anyone in my unit,' Han replied.

'Show… off,' Jin grunted.

Keung took in the vibrant cityscape of Ho Man Ting, alive with the bustling energy of its post-dimming nightlife. South Kowloon truly never slept. Illuminated walkways overwhelmed the dimmed lanterns, while groundscrapers flashed with screens across their faces. Towering glass plazas shimmered and buzzed with energy inside their enclosed streets, creating a kaleidoscope of colour and movement as Ho Man Ting thrived through its perpetual night shift.

Loud chants broadcasted from daoyinbos, temples of Dongism dedicated

to the Light, continued to echo through the air. Unlike the rest of Kowloon, where these sacred sounds fell silent after dark, the south remained alive with their rhythmic invocations through its restless nights.

Han's gaze flickered over Keung and Cheng's Kingmaker uniform, a hint of disapproval in his eyes.

'You keep staring at our coats, Han,' Cheng observed.

'I'm just surprised there's no flexibility in the Kingmaker dress code. That flappy skirt might be a disservice down here. Not so popular amongst the locals.' He adjusted the collar of his plain office attire. Jin wore the same, his fuzzy moustache and long hair the only details setting him apart from his co-captain.

'We aren't trained to cater to unrealistic fears,' Cheng responded calmly. 'When you're a Kingmaker, you learn that the worst people can do to you is stare. But I understand that's not true for all, I get why others might choose to blend in.'

Jin let out a low whistle. 'You Kings are somethin' else, huh?'

Han placed his palms on the table. 'Yezu Christ, these Tien Tao don't like getting to places on time, do they?'

The two Tai Li glanced around, prompting Keung to look at his holocommunicator. *He isn't wrong – they should have been here 15 minutes ago.*

Behind them, the café buzzed with energy, yet many people openly watched their table. Han was right about one thing. The Tai Li looked ordinary, but Keung and Cheng stood out in their dark Kingmaker trench coats, the golden accents and stripes gleaming even brighter in the south. Patrons paused when they realised who they were passing. For some, it was their first time seeing Kingmakers since the District Rebellions, and for those poor old souls, fear and paranoia struck deep.

South Kowlooni's learned that the Kingmakers didn't represent the brute militant; they embodied the cunning officer leading from behind, armed with a charming smile and a suspicious mastery of even the most obscure southern Yue accents. Their intentions were always deadlier than what they presented themselves as, and that alone kept most at bay.

'What ranks are our two Rioter contacts, sir?' Han asked Keung.

'Nwin Twan is senior staff. Ng Chan is cavalry guard,' Keung continued.

'Damn,' Jin half-groaned from his reclined position on the chair. 'Staff Rioters are fucking scary.'

'They're sending in the big dogs?' Han said. 'To raid an empty base? Something's up. Cavalry Guards aren't deployed unless it's wartime.'

'You're right…' Cheng noted as he tapped his chin. 'They're supposed to be in perpetual training until then. Maybe Mr Enji is being generous?'

'Or there's a message in there somewhere. They're already in war, and we don't know it.' Han concluded.

'I wouldn't go that far,' Keung began, but his words trailed off as the atmosphere in the café shifted. Conversations hushed, and all eyes turned towards the staircase leading up to the outdoor area. Keung's table clocked two Rioters ascending the steps. Their contacts had finally arrived. Clad in their infamous face visor helmets and black plate armour, topped with massive shields strapped to their backs, they strutted past the other patrons and approached the table.

All four men stood up, yet the Rioters walked past the Tai Li captains and extended their hands to Keung and Cheng alone.

'Light Illumine,' the Rioters greeted.

'Light Illumine,' Keung replied with a slight nod, along with Cheng. *I must remember to keep up with the southern customs. They follow Dongism different to us.*

'These are the two Tai Li who will be joining us,' Keung gestured towards Han and Jin. The Rioters' faces remained expressionless beneath their face-shields as they eyed Han and Jin. Finally, they extended their hands. The Tai Li let their hands hover for a moment before finally greeting them back, their expressions guarded.

'Light Illumine.'

'Light Illumine.'

****

Meanwhile, unbeknown to Keung and his team, Praefects Tao and Yutai were deep inside Fort Ho Man Ting, absorbed in their own mission and quietly captivated by the fortress's details.

'Fascinating. Your outer defences might seem excessive now,' Tao said. 'But during the District Rebellions, they would've been just what was needed.'

He recalled the details he'd noticed on entering the fort with Yutai. 'A detachable drawbridge, its chasm threatening instant death to invaders. And those holes above the gates…' he continued. 'Perfect for cracking skulls as your enemies scramble to enter the fort. The stairwells are narrow, and the steps slope down at a dangerous decline. I almost slipped on the way up. Pouring lubricant down them would make it impossible for a battalion to secure the watch towers. And I'm not forgetting the maze-like path to the courtyard. So many places for deadly southern traps… truly a masterclass in defensive strategy.'

Hung glanced at Yutai. 'Your companion has an eye for detail. Have you always been fascinated by this time in our history, Praefect Tao?'

'In my line of work, understanding the intricacies of war is essential. It's no different with Yutai, right, brother?'

'Huh? Oh yes. I, uh… saw all that, too. This fort's nice. Great, even.'

Standing well over six feet tall with broad shoulders, Hung was a groundscraper of a man, like many of his fellow Rioters. Southerners had distinctive physical traits that set them apart from the average Kowlooni: their characteristic southern tan and tall stature. Ushi, Tao's best friend and a southerner, was among the tallest in the tower. Unlike other elite forces, whose height varied, the Tien Tao were exceptionally rigid with this standard.

Although Hung wasn't a southerner by blood and lacked their characteristic nut-brown skin, he looked like them in every other way, from speech to build.

The Rioter uniform, consisting of layers of black plates, complemented by a helmet with a retractable face shield, gave them an intimidating presence. In the heat of riots, they brandished transparent, extendable shields and electric batons, which could be as lethal or as benign as the situation demanded.

Inside the fort, the Rioters just wore their black plate armour. Their flexibility ensured unhindered movement, but their weight demanded

strength. As a result, Rioters like Hung had a distinct, muscular build, further emphasised by their signature, buzzed haircuts. This wasn't a requirement for the ordinary law-enforcing gangsters of Ho Man Ting, the Nanfang.

The three walked through an open doorway and stepped into the central outdoor courtyard,where the noise level suddenly dropped. An immaculate bed of pebbles and cobblestone pathways framed a fountain, whose gentle splashing was the only sound breaking the stillness. Amidst the darkness of the dimmed lanterns, the twilight shrouding this beautiful bubble only added to its tranquillity.

'This courtyard was once a temple dedicated to Dong,' Hung began. 'Over time, the fort's religious significance faded, but this courtyard remains a place of solace and prayer for us. Many Rioters here still feel Dong's watchful presence.'

A sense of peace washed over Tao in the courtyard. Even before Hung mentioned its origins as a place of spirituality, he could feel his soul connect with the space. 'Ho Man Ting is the birthplace of Dongism,' Tao said aloud. 'Sites of worship here hold far more power than anywhere else in Kowloon.'

Hung continued talking as the three strolled. 'That's true. The spiritual significance of the south makes places like these even more holy.'

As Hung's long strides pulled him ahead, Tao felt Yutai tap on his shoulder.

He glanced back. 'What's up, brother?'

Yutai leaned in, whispering, 'Did you forget we're not actually here for the tour? You're too focused on the fort! I haven't even managed to plant a single tap!'

'I thought my job was to keep Hung distracted!' Tao whispered back. 'I've been doing just that! Figure something out!'

When Hung flicked his gaze to the two whispering Kingmakers, Yutai immediately cocked his head back and pulled a smile.

'Everything okay?' Hung raised a brow.

'Sorry, I was just telling Tao how much I want to see the famous Tien Tao dojos.'

Tao schooled his face to remain impassive and nodded.

'Hm. The dojos are locked at this hour, so I'll need to grab the keys from

my dormitory. Follow me through here,' Hung changed course and veered right toward an open door back into the fort.

Tao and Yutai walked side by side, with Hung leading the way. Every so often, Yutai would try to engage Hung in light banter about their youth. But all he received were curt responses and a distant demeanour. It was painfully obvious to Tao that whatever childhood bond Yutai shared with Hung had frayed over the years. He just hoped Yutai realised that, too.

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An uneasy truce bound the three factions – the Kingmakers, the Tai Li, and the Tien Tao Rioters – as they navigated the bustling south Kowlooni streets towards the supposed abandoned Yang base.

Cheng walked amidst the group, his gaze sharp, senses alert. When he'd first studied the mission brief, he found it odd that such high-ranking Rioters were assigned to a low-risk operation. The thought had lingered at the back of his mind, but after Jin mentioned that Rioter Cavalry never ventured outside their fort unless at war, his pulse sped up.

So, what are they doing here with us?

'I'm glad you guys chose a rendezvous point so close to the mission site,' Keung said to the two Rioters leading. 'The food was great.'

Silence.

Keung exchanged a glance with Cheng, who gave him an almost imperceptible shrug. *Real friendly, these guys.*

'How did you come to uncover this base?' Cheng probed, his tone more assertive than Keung's.

One of the Rioters finally responded, his voice flat and emotionless. 'Shortly after Jian's execution, we received word tenants in a unit near Ho Man Ting City were hurriedly moving out, carrying loads of computers and tech. We investigated the unit but soon realised the place was booby-trapped to hell. That's how we knew it's Yang. Mr Enji sought Kingmaker assistance to clear out the base for evidence, and so here we are.'

Cheng nodded to himself.

Ho Man Ting City, the district's capital, unfolded before them – a cityscape of foreign sights and sounds. Kowloonis referred it to as 'The City of a

Million Lanterns', as they hung in abundance over their heads in every street and walkway, albeit dimmed because of the late-cycle. Keung wished to see them in all their glory.

Huge, square, LED screens showcased advertisements for local south Kowlooni products rather than the big ten brands of North Kowloon.

Groundscrapers towered higher than anywhere else, many soaring beyond 120 floors. Keung recalled Denzhen explaining why Southerners built such tall structures, whereas everywhere else, the average building was between 70 to 90 storeys. '*Southerners say they have a spiritual impulse that no one else has; the impulse to get as close to the surface as possible.*'

Narrow passages forced the group into single file, ducking under low archways and dodging loose ductwork. Cheng narrowly avoided a sparking wire, its intermittent flashes reflecting off the damp walls. Makeshift walkways bridged collapsed sections of the floor, creaking under their weight. Despite the obstacles, Southern foot traffic flowed steadily in front and behind them, the locals navigating the urban landscape with confidence.

The air was thick with the mingled scents of incense, sizzling street food, and machine lubricant. Wild Southern mutts wove through the crowds and lounged in packs in shadowy corners, their tails swishing to ward off fleas. For Keung and his team of central Kowloonis, these creatures were as foreign as the people walking past them.

Above the ambient noise, the ever-present echoes of distant Daoyinbos – the temples of Dongism – broadcast ceaseless chants from the Book of Lumen. The sacred hymns added an otherworldly aura to the foreign southern lands. This effect was intensified by the prayers being chanted in Gouyue, or old southern Yue – an extinct dialect of southern Yue that Dong spoke, now an inherently holy dialect because of that association. Only southern Dongist sages knew it and spoke it during special prayers. Keung couldn't understand a single word.

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The next room Tao and Yutai entered felt like a museum. It was a large, square space with a central wall dividing it into two sections. The white walls were lined with glass displays, each displaying various artefacts illuminated

by cool lights.

'We call this room *Zhongguo*,' Hung said as Tao examined each of the displays. 'Care to guess why?'

Yutai scratched his head. But Tao was familiar with the name.

'I take it's because this room is the closest we'll ever get to the ancient Middle Kingdom?' Tao leaned over a display. 'I'm gonna go out on a limb and say this is what Dong called a "mobile phone"? A communication device used by the surface civilisations.'

The object looked was sleek and black rectangular device with no buttons. Its surface looked cracked, as if damaged by a fall.

'So, what's Zhongguo mean?' Yutai asked. 'It sounds familiar.'

Tao was staring at the display case, barely able to tear his gaze away. 'Probably because the Ibilis mentioned the name during his speech. Zhongguo was our sister civilisation on the surface. It's the kingdom we were part of before The Great Sinking and the first place Dong visited during his pilgrimage. They say your Yu tower is styled after a typical building in Zhongguo all those years ago.'

'That's true. You have a real fascination for these things, eh Praefect? Far stronger than most foreigners.'

'It's my religion too, Hung. I love Dong's word as much as you do.'

Hung nodded his head and raised a finger, as if remembering something. 'I need to show you something special. Don't move an inch, I'll be back in a second.'

Hung hurried out of the exhibition room, leaving the two Kingmakers alone.

'Should I leave now to plant a tap?' Yutai asked Tao.

'No, it'll be too risky. He may come back any moment. Best we just wait here.'

Yutai tapped his foot and whistled, looking at the various artefacts around the room as Tao walked to another display case.

'You think we could take this fort if we wanted to?' Yutai asked.

Tao raised an eyebrow. *Yutai and his wild hypotheses.* 'No chance.'

Yutai pressed a hand against his chest in mock shock. 'I'm hurt! Come

on! Why the hell not?'

'Because. If we could, we would've done it during the rebellions. Ho Man Ting is a strategic district in the heart of the south. Its cultural significance alone would have made it a priority, but could we capture it? Light knows we tried, brother.'

'Okay, I get that, but I recall from our classes that by the time we reached Ho Man Ting, our forces were disorganised and exhausted. But imagine if that wasn't the case: a small army of experienced Kingmakers armed with the latest tech, putting this fort to siege. Why the hell couldn't we do it?'

'Kingmakers don't storm fortresses. We're strategists, guiding the charge from behind. An army of Kingmakers is stupid. We're never meant to be an army.'

'All right then, picture this: Five experienced Kingmakers lead a military campaign to take Fort Ho Man Ting. Surrounding the fort are 30 Ji Sias, 50 Pak militiamen and 60 Kam Sham Black Jackets. A frontal assault, seven-cycles worth of upkeep. The fort gets adequate prep time, too.'

Tao pretended to ponder, tapping his chin. 'Depends on the Kingmakers leading. What rank are they? If they're tribunes or higher, I've got to hand it to you, it *might* be a challenge for the Rioters. For the first few cycles. Even if we add a legate, the fort would still just hold us off until we ran out of supplies.'

'Okay, final change to the conditions. Cheng, Shing, Ushi, you, and myself. With us, 200 gangsters ready to die at our command. Reckon we could pull it off?'

'You've just downgraded the legates to a bunch of praefecti!' Tao let out a laugh.

'But, to our credit,' Yutai interjected, 'If we weren't the most promising praefecti in the tower, General Denzhen would never have picked us for Keung's team.'

'Sure…' Tao said with an uncertain tone. 'Maybe if you threw in General Cao, give him a yapyan pill before the battle, play some DaoTaoFengi into his earpiece, then maybe all of us might reach that courtyard before we're all corpses on the floor.'

Yutai chuckled once again, shaking his head. 'All right, you win.'

Suddenly, the sound of approaching footsteps drew their attention to Hung returning, holding a small card in his hand.

'Apologies, I just needed to get clearance. I'm going to show you an artefact that's usually off limits'

Tao raised an eyebrow. *What makes it so important?*

Hung led the pair to the back of the room, passing glass displays on either side. They stopped in front of a plain white wall, positioned between two display cases that were spaced further apart than the others. The wall itself was unremarkable, but there was an odd sense of emptiness, as if a painting should've hung there, or a third display case to fill the gap between the two.

Hung swiped the card against the blank, white wall and as if out of some West Kowlooni spy flick, a section of the wall rumbled down to reveal a small, square chamber.

'We had to keep this artefact hidden from view. It would give Warlord Xinjian a headache if we reminded our neighbours we have this. They all know we have it, but not where it is. We've held onto many of Dong's holy artefacts because Ho Man Ting was his home. That hasn't stopped the other districts from petitioning to have some for their own museums. But this one… We'd never consider giving it away.'

As the wall finally slid down, Hung stepped inside, gesturing to the two men to follow him. In the centre of this small room stood one last display case, similar to the others outside but longer. Tao's jaw dropped as he instantly recognised the object inside.

Resting sideways on two short stands was a gleaming, golden spear. This wasn't just some artefact from the surface like the others. In fact, it wasn't even from the surface.

'Anju's Spear,' Tao whispered. 'Un-be-liev-able.'

'That can't be…' Yutai stared at Tao in disbelief before snapping his gaze to the display.

'It is,' Hung said. 'This is the legendary spear Anju used to defend Dong, right until his death. Anju was the first to recognise Dong's mission and the first to place his trust in his return from his divine pilgrimage. No one else

believed a trip to the surface and back was possible.'

Tao knelt down, feeling unworthy to be in its presence. His eyes were drawn to every tiny nick and scratch – imperfections from over 800 annui-cycles ago, untouched by the ravages of time since then. The spear's tip gleamed with an ethereal light. It curved gently, while it's long handle, cracked but thick and ornate, bore inscriptions in an extinct southern script known as Gouyue.

'While Dong was up on the surface,' Hung explained, 'Anju rallied believers of the Light to await his return. Despite harsh persecution, Anju's faith in his friend never wavered. He mastered the highest forms of swordsmanship with this spear, attaining legendary skill. And when Dong returned after four annui-cycles, against all odds, a sea of followers greeted him, all thanks to Anju's tireless devotion.'

Hung's voice softened, as if sharing a secret, and the two Kingmakers leaned closer. 'Anju wasn't just a disciple; he was Dong's shield, his protector. He wielded this spear to defend the faith against countless adversaries. However, the weapon's most poignant tale is from Dong's final hours.'

Tao hung on every word. The mystery of Dong's death was one of Kowloon's greatest unsolved riddles. The south had its own version of events, often clashing with the accepted history.

'Final hours?' Yutai said. 'I thought no one knew about his final hours.'

'Well, Dong was in his 50s,' Hung continued. 'He'd fallen from grace in the Yaozhi courts after he received a second vision. This vision, whatever it was, wasn't favoured by Emperor Hongwu – unlike Dong's first vision 30 annui-cycles ago which motivated his mission to the surface and saw him welcomed into the Emperor's council after his return. This time, Hongwu forbade Dong from canonising the new vision into scripture.'

Tao kept quiet, but he was already familiar with this story. *Dong's second vision is more a religious conspiracy theory than anything else,* he thought. *The legend of the lost trilogy.*

Hung continued. 'Dong believed this second vision was more important than his first, original revelation. He defied the Emperor and published his new trilogy. In response, the Kingmakers enacted a royal regicide against

our messenger and raided his family home. Anju was the final obstacle between them and Dong's family in the estate on that cold morning. In the end, both Anju and Dong fell, side by side, betrayed by the Emperor.'

Yutai raised a brow. 'Regicided? By the Kingmakers? He wasn't even a lord. Your syntax doesn't even make sense. The academy taught us he passed onto the Light in both physical and spiritual forms. It's why no one ever found his body. But do you seriously believe the lost trilogy shit? Sounds like Yang propaganda!'

Hung's gaze remained fixed on the spear, his voice tinged with bitterness. 'Yang,' he sneered. 'Outside the South, our own history is rinsed and sanitised, altering tales to paint a sweet picture. I called it a royal regicide because those were the tactics Hongwu used. *Four* Kingmakers. Dong's relationship with Emperor Hongwu wasn't as harmonious as the books claim. Had the truth been told, Kowloon would have recognised that the Yaozhi dynasty's mandate of heaven had already expired.'

'I have my doubts,' Yutai countered. 'Emperor Hongwu was a convert to Dongism himself. Why would he kill his own prophet?'

'The south sees Emperor Hongwu and his Zhaisheng differently than the rest of Kowloon,' Hung said. 'You see him as a brilliant innovator and a prodigious Emperor for ushering a golden age. In your eyes, we southerners should revere him for transforming Kowloon's religious landscape in a single generation. But we have no illusions about why Hongwu did what he did. He didn't love Dong or his revelation – he just exploited him to secure his own legacy.'

Yutai's expression darkened as Hung continued, 'Hongwu's status as the greatest Kowlooni Emperor was cemented when he brought Dong into his court. Dong was his secret weapon, the reason for the golden age that followed. Together, they established the mandate of heaven, making the dynasty *holy*. It was a power play, not a sign of genuine faith. Hongwu famously exploited every aspect of the surface that Dong documented and brought back. In the end, Emperor Hongwu admired the stories of the Roman Emperor Constantine more than anything Dong offered. Sensing parallel circumstances, he became interested in replicating Emperor

Constantine's Christian legacy using Dongism. So, he pushed for radical cultural changes to create his personal Pax Romana*:* The Zhaisheng. He renamed the Kingmakers after Roman ranks and reshuffled structures to resemble the Roman imperial court. It all just became an obsession for him that, frankly, even the prophet Dong found really strange. I doubt Hongwu even bothered with his obligatory prayers. To the south, it's no surprise that he killed our prophet.'

'I don't buy it,' Yutai said firmly. 'If Emperor Hongwu really murdered our prophet, it would be more known by now. Over 600 annui-cycles have passed! Thousands of historians and theologians all over Kowloon have dedicated their lives to studying Dong's last moments. Are they all part of a great conspiracy? Southerners don't love our prophet more than we do, Hung! We value justice as much as anyone else.'

'Justice is a rare commodity in this world…' Hung murmured.

'Don't feel too bad, Hung,' Tao's suddenly interjected. 'Anju's daughter spent the rest of her years tracking down those she believed were responsible for killing the prophet and her father. I know history paints her as a violent vigilante, but every person she deemed guilty floated faced-down in the Memorial Pipes. From the lords in their meeting rooms to the grunts who just followed orders. She even managed to assassinate the four Kingmakers who allegedly took part in the mission. That, to me, sounds like classic Kowlooni justice.'

'I didn't expect you to know the end of that tale,' Hung said. 'But then again, you'd know she missed one crucial conspirator in Dong's murder, Emperor Hongwu himself. Now, his legacy stands as the greatest of any Kowlooni ruler.'

Tao's voice dropped to a menacing purr. 'Do you believe the Yaozhis still owe their blood to justice? For what their ancestors may have done to our prophet?'

Hung stared at him silently, a tumult of emotions swirling beneath the surface. But Tao refused to look away until he got an answer.

'I fear I may break several federal laws if I were to speak my mind on that. Whatever true justice looks like, I am confident Hongwu faced it after

death. And I know the remaining Yaozhis will too once they stand before the Light.'

Tao leaned in, his voice low and challenging. 'And do you think the Yang are the Light's answer to justice, Hung?'

'I… don't know.'

Hung quickly shook off his hesitation and spoke quickly. 'Anju was native to the area we now know as Ho Man Ting. It's only fitting his blade finds its resting place here, hidden from prying eyes. Normally, I would never allow a Kingmaker near it. I'm not even sure why I showed you. Thought the conversation would go down differently. Come on, let's grab the keys to the dojo from my dorm. It's getting late.'

Tao's eyes narrowed as they strode behind Hung out of the chamber. Their guide, much like the fort, held secrets of his own.

19

Fort Ho Man Ting

The fortress of the Tien Tao Rioters was an enduring pillar of southern culture and history, its roots reaching back further than the birth of Dongism itself. Its original construction sought to create an unofficial second capital of Kowloon, rivalling the mighty palace of the Kingmakers in District Yu. A symbol of defiance against the northerners, who looked, spoke and thought differently.

With Dong's rise to prophethood six centuries ago, the fortress's focus shifted from being a bastion of war to a spiritual stronghold. Where artillery once stood ready, the courtyard had become a temple to the Light, opening its gates for the weekly congregational prayers. Prayers in Gouyue etched its once plain walls. For the Tien Tao, defending Ho Man Ting from warring invaders and protecting the southern Dongist faith from the influence of foreign secularism became a single, unyielding battle.

No matter how close any Kingmaker got to the Rioters, Tao knew one truth remained: this fortress had been built to stand against people like him and Yutai. This place would always be a rival to their tower and authority, a divide that has grown astonishingly wide in recent annui-cycles.

The two Kingmakers followed Hung, a senior Rioter in the Tien Tao ranks and a childhood acquaintance of Yutai. But since their conversation about Anju's spear, Hung's enthusiasm for the tour appeared to have dwindled. His once-frequent historical titbits about the fort became more monosyllabic,

he was curt, and he moved on quickly after showing them further places.

As they ventured deeper into the fort towards the dorms, Tao's sense of unease grew. Doors quietly shut as they walked past and the other Rioters averted their eyes, yet he felt gazes linger behind. *They're watching us. I can feel it. I swear I've seen the same faces walk past more than once now.*

Tao tried to push his unsettling thoughts aside and reminded himself no one in Kowloon, not even the fearsome Tien Tao Rioters, would dare harm them.

The trio came upon a fork in the hallways. Without hesitation, Hung led the Kingmakers to the right.

'What's down the other way?' Yutai asked casually.

'The detention level,' Hung said as he picked up the pace. 'Those we can't keep with the general population prisoners come here.'

Yutai's eyes flicked to Tao, who caught the signal. *He wants to see if they're holding any Yang prisoners. Clever, Yutai.* Tao gave a subtle nod of approval.

'Could we take a look?' Yutai asked.

Hung seemed to speed up even more, but Yutai and Tao stopped in their tracks, waiting for an answer.

Sensing their halt, Hung stood still. 'No. The prisons are off-limits. We house individuals who pose unique threats to Ho Man Ting. War criminals, political terrorists, cult leaders, undocumented migrants from the Wildlands. You won't find any petty criminals. Even low-ranking Rioters aren't allowed down there.'

'But we're not low-ranking Rioters,' Tao pressed. 'Between us Kingmakers and you Rioters, there aren't any secrets to keep. We're leading the fight against Kowloon's most dangerous threats. One glance won't hurt, will it?'

Hung's posture stiffened. 'If it's the Yang you're wondering about, you'll find none here. They're sent to the local maximum-security detention centre. Regardless, our policies are strict. I ask that you respect them.'

Yutai frowned. 'But you just said this place holds political prisoners and terrorists. What do you call the Yang?'

Hung swung his head towards Yutai. 'Of *course* they're terrorists. But if we held every Yang we captured in the fort dungeons, we'd run out of cells.

So, we keep them with the general population.'

Tao's eyes narrowed. *Something doesn't add up.*

'Just how many Yangs have you arrested?' he asked. 'Since Operation Searchlight, we've caught very few. Seems you guys have something figured that we haven't.'

Hung's reply was quick. 'Ho Man Ting is the capital of the south. Thousands of southerners cross our borders for work every day, so it's only natural Yang activity is higher here.'

Tao studied Hung's face, weighing the lie between his words. *A little too rehearsed.*

Sensing the conversation had hit a wall, Tao let out an exhale. 'Well, seeing as we haven't heard about any of these arrests, you'd best start reporting your numbers to the tower. It'd be good to interrogate a few of these Yangs.'

Hung nodded and resumed walking towards the dorms, his pace unnaturally quick. Yutai brushed against Tao's arm, the nudge barely noticeable but loaded with meaning.

Yes, Yutai, Tao thought. *I don't know if I believe that either.*

The three of them walked past different branching corridors, all of which looked the same, until they passed a corridor that had walls painted in vivid shades of blue.

'Hey, Hung?' Yutai called out. The Rioter appeared not to hear him – or at least pretended not to – until Yutai called out a second time, with less patience in his voice.

'Hung. I'm calling you.'

The Rioter stopped and turned around. 'Do you have another question?'

'I saw a corridor just now with blue walls. What's down that way?'

'Our communication centre. All intelligence we gather around Ho Man Ting goes through there.'

Tao caught a further look from Yutai, who flashed his gaze downwards. His thumb and pointer on his right hand were pressed tip to tip in a known Kingmaker symbol: *Objective located.*

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As soon as Cheng saw unit numbers on the doors to his left and right, he

knew the Yang base wasn't far. Scornful eyes had followed the Kingmakers since they got off the King rail at the Yau Embassy, but Cheng was used to this sensation by now.

The two Rioters halted in front of a door marked "352." The rest of the group stood around it, waiting for instructions.

'Well? Is this it?' Jin groused.

'Yes, give us a moment to unlock it.' One of the Rioters walked towards the door.

'Hold on,' Han interrupted, blocking the Rioter's approach with a hand. 'I'm not comfortable heading into enemy territory blind. You mentioned booby traps. What kind are we dealing with exactly?'

'The southern kind – collapsible floors, kinetic spikes, upturned sharpened rods designed to leave you with a lifelong limp.' The Rioter almost sounded proud of it. Cheng recalled from his academy days that these traps were notorious, used by southern gangsters during the Rebellions.

'Great,' Han snarked, still holding the armoured Rioter in place with his palm. 'So, what's our strategy for combing through these traps? Do we go first and be your disposable lives?' He looked into the Rioter's eyes behind the face shield. Rioters were tall, but Han matched them in stature.

'Not at all,' the Rioter replied smoothly. 'We've got floor plans for this base. They're 30 annui-cycles out of date, but it's better than nothing. We'll lead the way, room by room, until the area is secure.'

Han shook his head. 'That sounds way too simple. I didn't think the famously conservative Mr Enji would risk sending a Rioter Cavalry Officer into the field for some back-shelf recon job. Aren't you guys meant to be tucked away in your fort until war?'

'A legend we uphold to maintain a fearsome image,' replied the other Rioter. 'In reality, we go on assignments all the time.'

'All right guys, let's cut the sceptical detective act,' Keung said, glancing at the Tai Li. 'We're wasting time.'

'Tribune Cheng,' Han pressed. 'Aren't you the least bit concerned? You've got the Emperor's nephew walking into a booby-trapped base, relying solely on the "trust me's" of a bunch of southerners.'

'Maybe we should send drones in first?' Keung suggested, as he turned to face Cheng.

'I'm not trekking to the tower and back for drones, sir. Let's just get this done,' he said to the Tai Li. 'If General Denzhen was okay with sending his son, I don't know what we've got to worry about. This is just another sweep.'

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The tour of the fort continued as Hung, Yutai and Tao approached the dorms. Large windows lined the right-hand wall of the hallway, through which Tao glimpsed rows of four-tier bunks, nearly all occupied by sleeping Rioters. 'The dorm is just ahead,' Hung said, gesturing towards a closed door at the end of the hallway.

As Hung swiped his key to open the door, Yutai's holocommunicator rang. Both Hung and Tao turned to see him staring at its holographic display above his wrist, his brow furrowed.

Who's calling this late? Tao wondered.

'Huh… It's…' Yutai looked confused as he scratched his jaw. 'It's Emperor Puyin…'

Tao's eyes widened. 'The Emperor? Quickly, answer it! Could be urgent!'

The Rioter froze, clearly realising the weight of a call from *the* Emperor of Kowloon.

'I'll need to take this, Hung,' Yutai said. 'Mind if I step into the hallway while you grab the key? Can't have listeners.'

Hung squinted at Yutai as he gave a slow nod. 'Just… don't wander far.'

Yutai nodded vigorously before swiping the call open and vanishing around the bend in the corridor.

'Follow me. I'll grab the key and we'll wait for Yutai to return,' Hung instructed Tao.

They stepped through the door and into the dorms. Inside was dim but not pitch black, illuminated by dull blueish lamp lights. The soft hum of ceiling fans and the chorus of snores tugged at Tao's eyelids.

'There are several more dorm rooms, but this is the largest one. My bunk is just a few rows down. The keys to the dojos should be in my drawer,' he

whispered. 'And be careful not to bump into the beds. We sleep light.'

Tao followed Hung to one of the bunks. The top three tiers were full of sleeping Rioters, but the bottom one, where Hung presumably slept, was empty. Hung opened a side drawer to the right of the bed, picked up his key, and closed it. They crept their way out of the dorm rooms and waited outside near the door.

'How was the fort during the rebellions?' Tao asked.

'You guys should know. You guys threw everything you had into trying to take it. So, it must've been important.'

'We were close a few times, but the east joined the fight at a very opportune time. Kept us scrambling all over Kowloon,' Tao said. 'In hindsight, I'm relieved we couldn't capture it. This fort is so much more than a place for war. It's become a temple to the Light. We central Kowloonis are no spiritual caretakers like you southerners. Have you seen our daoyinbos? Central temples of Light pale in comparison to the grand structures you all build down south. We have no right to watch over this fort. Better off in southern hands.'

For the first time during the tour, Hung's stern expression softened.

'During the height of the rebellions, this stronghold was a sanctuary for civilians. When glide-bombers loomed over Ho Man Ting, a single siren would wail from the fort that could be heard all the way to the district borders. The gates would gape open for as many citizens as possible to seek refuge within our walls. Older Rioters have told me how back then, any space available would be used for refugees. Even the toilet floors became places of rest. This fort kept so many alive that people have linked its spirit to Anju himself: protector of his followers.'

'I am glad the fort became a mighty shield for your people.'

'*My people...* Unfortunately, I have no right to claim southern heritage as my own. I'm a native of Sung Wong… just like Yutai. For all I know, my grandfather may have killed many southerners during his draft. I was just raised in this culture and have been accepted among them.'

'Yutai… Has he changed much since you two were kids?' Tao asked.

Hung's gaze was distant, as if sifting through memories. 'Yutai? I

remember him always being at the heart of any gathering, trying his best to make sure no one felt left out.'

'Then he's still the same. But he's blissfully naive about the world around him. He sees the south as just another region of Kowloon, no different from the west or the north. He doesn't understand the nuances of this post-war society we're now living in, where we all resent each other for complex reasons. But you know, despite his antics, there's a dangerously sharp mind in there, thirsting to do the right thing. Always thinking, always planning for a way forward.'

Hung met Tao's gaze. 'Oh, you don't have to remind me. The way you two are looking around the fort, it's like I've invited my *enemies* to study our stronghold for battle. But I guess that's just how a Kingmaker's mind operates. *Always in the pursuit of knowledge*.'

Beneath the Tien Tao Rioter's restrained words, Tao sensed he was growing more suspicious about their presence here in the fort. Realising the precariousness of his position, isolated from his partner, Tao held his tongue.

****

I can't believe that worked, Yutai thought. *Good job playing along, Tao.* His rubber-soled boots made almost no sound as he sprinted through the dimly lit halls, retracing his steps to the blue corridor earlier.

Voices grew louder from a corridor to his left. Without missing a beat, Yutai darted ahead, slipping around a corner before the approaching Rioters could see him. He pressed himself against the wall and held his breath until the voices faded.

His heart pounded in his chest as he navigated the maze of corridors. Every distant echo or murmur had him diving into the shadows, waiting for the threat to pass.

At last, the blue-painted hallway appeared before him. Yutai pressed his ear against the cold surface of the locked door, straining to hear any sign of life from the other side.

Nothing, he thought. *Means I can plant the wire in peace.*

This door wasn't guarding just any room; it was the very heart of the

fort's communications. Behind it, he would determine whether the Tien Tao Rioters were truly in league with the Yang, or if they were genuinely blindsided that fateful night in Ho Man Ting Square. Whatever answer was behind the door had the potential to change the course of their fight against the Yang.

Yutai knew this door would have nothing short of magnetic seals. These were the tightest form of security available.

But he had an ace up his sleeve, a tool bestowed on only a select few Kingmakers after the short-lived yet groundbreaking *Kingmaker Cybernetic Initiative*. With this, even the most formidable magnetic seal would be child's play.

Glancing at his right hand, Yutai vigorously rubbed the base of his palm with his left thumb. The pressure was meant to stimulate blood flow, activating the primitive cybernetic implant installed beneath his skin. Each press left a pale thumb print that flushed red as blood rushed back. The device was rudimentary, offering no sign of its activation. He could only trust in the process.

The sound of distant footsteps indicated an incoming patrol was about to cross the doors. This time, there was no corner or shadow to dive into. Urgency gripped him. He hovered the base of his palm over the door's midsection, yet he couldn't hear the locks click. He tried near the bottom. *Nothing! Come on!* Desperation mounting, he moved to the top. Nothing again.

Maybe the blood flow didn't activate it.

He pressed his thumb harder into his palm, willing the implant to respond. He felt the bones in his palm shift at the pressure.

The footsteps grew closer, their rhythm quickening Yutai's heartbeat. Rubbing hard and fast, he swept his hand across all three points once more.

Click. Click... Click.

The door whispered open, revealing a dark void. Without hesitation, Yutai slipped inside, his fingers instinctively finding a button on the adjacent wall to seal the door behind him.

Every sense heightened, Yutai held his breath and pressed himself against

the cold wall. The muffled footsteps he'd been dreading passed his door, growing fainter until they were swallowed by the distance. He let out a huge breath.

Activating his cap's visor light, a soft cool-white glow illuminated the vast, chilled room. The hum of the air-conditioning was the only sound. All he could do now was trust Tao to keep Hung distracted long enough for him to complete his mission.

20

The Tien Tao Rioters

'Hung, I never said thank you for showing Yutai and me Anju's spear. I… I realise now I might have gone my entire life never seeing it, had it not been for you.'

'Truthfully, it wasn't even for Yutai. I saw how much you know about our culture. The respect you have for it almost palpable. Most foreigners learn our history only to mock it further, but from the start of this tour, I sensed you were different.'

'If it helps, I don't deny the possibility of Dong's last trilogy. I know many southerners believe it to be truth, and I don't discount that reality.'

Hung frowned. 'But… You're a Kingmaker…'

'I am a child of the Light, first and foremost. And I am on a personal mission to uncover the true covenant of our prophet. Much of our accepted history is not as clear-cut as we believe. Some of it is even blatant falsehood. In this journey for truth, I am prepared to discover that our most foundational truths are lies, and our most controversial taboos may, in fact, be the real truth.'

Hung's brows were raised while Tao continued. 'My family's patriarchal line traces back to one of Dong's earliest disciples in Ho Man Ting, an early convert named Kwang Yew. He was tasked with spreading the word of the Light, so Dong sent him and his family to Central Kowloon to pioneer and proselytise. A few generations ago, when we proved our direct relationship

to Kwang Yew, we were invited to replace the acting clergy, who had a weaker connection to Dong.'

'Hold on…' Hung's head tilted to the side as a smile crept onto his face. 'Your family are the sages of your district? Which one?'

'Tsin Wai.'

Hung sucked in a breath. 'Southern blood courses through you, brother. Your forefather was a companion of Dong. I-I'm speechless… Had I known earlier, I'd have—'

Tao hesitated, debating whether to reveal the next part of his story. The part where he'd decided to become a Kingmaker instead of inheriting his father's role as district Tsin Wai's next sage.

'Nonsense, Hung. Yes, I've got some southern blood, but we've lived amongst central Kowloonis for hundreds of annui-cycles. Because of that, I will always be a guest here. I know what I am – a Kingmaker. But equally, I can't ignore the Yaozhi dynasty's transgressions and the atrocities they've committed against Dong's motherland. All the violence we wrought during the rebellions. But there's much more autonomy in the tower than most think. We're given a lot of power to work on our own, hold our own opinions. Ask ten different Kingmakers what they think of the dynasty they serve, and you'll get ten different answers.'

Hung stared at Tao, disbelief in his eyes. 'You're a rare one, Tao. Few outsiders really understand, let alone acknowledge, the southern plight. Had we been born under different circumstances, I'd have wanted to be friends with you.'

Tao raised a brow. 'Who says you still can't?'

Hung's eyes stilled, as if his mind were flooded with a thousand thoughts. Then, with a slight dilation of his pupils, he stared through Tao. 'You should call Yutai. It's been more than ten minutes.'

With a nod, Tao raised his wrist and initiated a call.

Ring. Ring. Ring.

After the third, it ceased.

'What does that mean?' Hung asked, his voice tense. 'Did he decline it, or did it just ring out?'

Tao called again. *It rang out. Why would Yutai let it ring out?*

It rang three times and went silent again.

'Tao…? Where's Yutai?' Hung's question hung in the air, yet Tao hesitated.

'He must be on his way back,' he replied, though his voice lacked conviction.

Hung's trained expression morphed into a scowl that hinted at deeper concerns than Yutai being merely lost. Then, out of no where, his scowl exploded into anger.

'You ***bloody*** Kingmakers!' His words reverberated against the walls and ceilings, causing to Tao step back. 'Just wandering around the fort like you *own* the place!'

'I'll try calling him again, there's no need to panic.'

'Don't bother. Stay here. I'll find out where he is.'

Hung stormed off down the corridor and around the bend. In his absence, the still air crackled with uncertainty, as if the very walls held their breath, awaiting the next act.

Tao's fingers jumped into action over the holoprojector strapped to his wrist. The device hummed to life with its projected interface glowing below his determined face. Tao sent Yutai three consecutive buzzes, a signal to warn him to return immediately.

He attempted to reassure himself, reminding his racing mind that as long as no one caught his partner installing the wiretaps, a simple 30-second process, he'd be fine.

A Rioter could never do anything to a Kingmaker.

Minutes crawled by as Tao waited for Yutai to return. Nothing. *Where the hell is he?* The scenarios he was imagining were worsening by the second. Five minutes passed. Then ten.

Yutai, please come back. Light, guide my brother back to me.

Footsteps approached and Tao shot his head to the other end of the hallway, expecting to see Yutai running back.

But it wasn't Yutai who emerged from the shadows of the corridor. It was Hung storming back, his shoulders rigid with anger.

Tension radiated between them as Hung stood before him. 'Your tour

has reached its conclusion. Regrettably, time has betrayed us, and I cannot show you around the dojo.' He strode past Tao to secure the dorm doors.

'What? Where's Yutai? Did you find him?'

As the door hissed shut, Hung turned. 'The tour has concluded. It's likely he headed home.'

Tao's brows knitted together. 'What? *Excuse me?*'

Hung's expression was like granite. 'Please follow me while I escort you to the gates.'

'I'm not going anywhere without my partner!' Tao growled.

Hung's patience slipped. 'As a senior Rioter, I'm demanding you to follow me outside. You are nothing but a *guest* in our fort. You have no authority here. Now, follow me.'

I have authority over the Warlord of Ho Man Ting himself! 'No. I won't go *anywhere* until I know my partner is safe.'

But the Rioter's response was chillingly direct. A motion, a gesture that spoke volumes. He shifted his uniform coat aside, his hand settling on the grip of his hand cannon, a lethal RX-15 Sibiv blaster – truly the weapon of a senior Rioter.

Tao's pulse raced. His gaze remained fixed on the weapon as he analysed the situation, calculating potential outcomes, *would he dare shoot a King?!*

The instinct to react, to defend himself, twitched his very muscles. His breathing amplified, each breath and each blink a conscious act as he restrained himself from flipping Hung on his head in a hundred different ways. The situation was spiralling, his heart beating louder and louder in his ears.

Tao pried his eyes off the blaster and willed himself to calm down, meeting the Rioter's eyes. *If I go guns blazing, I'm not sure how far I'd make it. I need to cooperate for now. Violence won't give me a way out.*

'Very well. I'll follow.' Tao cautiously turned towards the other end of the hall. 'I'm not looking for trouble.'

Hung let go of his coat and moved behind Tao. 'Start walking, Kingmaker!'

The two navigated the corridor, one after another. Anytime there was an intersection in the hallways, Hung would tell him to go either straight,

left or right. Nothing more. If Tao slowed down, Hung placed his palm on Tao's back to nudge him to walk faster.

What in the name of the Light is happening? Yutai, you fool! What have you gotten us into?

With each step, his ears pulsed redder and hotter.

As the two made their way through the fort, Tao noticed Rioters hurrying in the opposite direction.

Something was amiss. The fort buzzed with a new urgency that was impossible to ignore. Tao's senses were on high alert as they traversed the fort's familiar passageways towards the entrance.

When they reached the grand gates, Tao made a final plea. 'Hung, what's going on? Please, I need to know. Don't do anything you Rioters will regret!' He jabbed his finger at the tall Rioter.

Hung's response was cold and swift. 'Return to your Tower, Tao. The Kingmakers have no place in Ho Man Ting.'

As the steel barriers descended, separating him from Hung, a sense of isolation enveloped Tao. Alone now, his composure began to unravel. He fumbled with his holocommunicator, fingers trembling, as he called Yutai once more.

But the line remained ominously silent.

Realisation hit him. His partner was in danger. Tao teetered on the edge of desperation, torn between seeking help and plunging into a darkness of his own making. He had failed to protect his partner during an unauthorised mission.

Need to call Lieutenant Keung...

No. Tribune Cheng will know what to do, Tao decided.

'Brother? Is everything okay?' Cheng asked, picking up the call.

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A gnawing feeling told Cheng that something was terribly wrong.

'Tao, talk to me!'

Simultaneously, one of the Rioters picked up a call and walked down the hall, talking in a thick, southern Yue accent. Cheng shot a scathing glare at the remaining Rioter, who was in a staring match with the Tai Li duo.

Tao's voice came through in hurried whispers. *'Something's gone very wrong. The Rioters have taken Yutai captive—'*

'What?!'

'I'm heading back to the tower.'

'Tower? Tao, where the hell are you? Where's Yutai?'

'I'm at the fort.'

'What fort?!'

The Rioter who stood near him shot Cheng a sharp glance, then over his shoulder to his comrade, who was still speaking down the hallway.

'Fort Ho Man Ting! We came to... to do something.' Tao exclaimed. *'These damned Rioters have turned the coat! I think I'm being followed. I have to get to the King rail!'*

Tao hung up. The Rioter who had stepped away returned and leaned in to his comrade's ear, whispering something urgent. Cheng stood frozen, thoughts spinning.

'What happened?' Keung whispered, concern contracting his brows.

'Yutai was…' Cheng's words faltered, his eyes narrowing onto the Rioters. They stared back, cold and unblinking.

'Who was that call from?' Cheng demanded.

'Mr Enji. There's an emergency at the fort. We need to return immediately, but you're free to continue on your own.'

'Excuse me?' Cheng tilted his head and snapped. 'You're not going anywhere. We're in the middle of a Kingmaker operation; you don't just bail halfway! And what's going on at the fort?'

'Nothing that concerns you. This operation hasn't even begun, Kingmaker,' the other Rioter responded.

Han and Jin slowly flanked the Rioters, closing in, tightening the circle.

'He asked you a question,' Jin pressed, his voice low and firm. 'What's happening at your fort? Why are you in such a hurry to leave?'

The Rioters shifted, inching closer to each other, muscles taut. Their only way out was going back through the trapped, dark base. Then, suddenly, their wrist screens pinged blue with a new message. All eyes flicked downward.

"Return to Fort Now – Urgent!"

In an instant, the tension exploded and the Rioters struck first. A fist flew towards Jin; his head slipped right. Han and Cheng retaliated at the same time with violent strikes, but the Rioters wove through them, shields crashing into knuckles, blocks turning into counters. The air thickened with the sound of grunts and shuffling armour.

They shoved Jin and Han back with a sudden surge of force, then kicked Cheng back, sending him stumbling into Keung against the rear wall.

The two Rioters bolted down the apartment hallway, disappearing down a flight of stairs.

'Tribune Cheng?! What do we do?!' Han shouted, swiftly springing back to his feet. Jin leaned against the wall, panting with his fists ready.

Cheng's eyes burned with determination as he pointed down the hall. 'Arrest those Rioters!' he ordered at the top of his lungs. 'They've taken Yutai!'

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Han and Jin set after the Rioters.

How did they take Yutai? Keung thought as Cheng hauled him to his feet.

'Are you all right, sir?' Cheng helped dust down Keung's trench coat.

'Don't worry about me! We can't let them get away!' Keung shouted, surging past Cheng, nearly stumbling before catching his stride. The tribune followed close behind, while the echoes of the Tai Li's pursuit bounced through the corridors ahead.

At the hall's end, a staircase led to the main street, where at the bottom, a poor man lay sprawled, struggling to rise.

They went into the streets! They move fast in that armour! Keung realised.

With no time to help the man, he leapt from the top of the stairs, landing in front of an open scissor gate. Beyond it, the chaotic post-dimming streets of Ho Man Ting roared in full force. Keung emerged into the haze, the chase seemingly lost.

His gaze flitted across the masses, searching for any sign of a break in the flow of movement. Cheng slid up beside him, both scanning the crowds.

And then, to his left, Keung spotted a cluster of disgruntled pedestrians,

their angry shouts piercing the dull hum of their surroundings. They pointed with annoyed scowls.

'There!' Keung shouted.

'They're heading to their fort,' Cheng snapped. 'I'll try to cut them off, but don't lose them!' The Tribune ran off in another direction into the crowd with his holocommunicator map showing a quick route to Fort Ho Man Ting.

Adrenaline surging, Keung dove headlong into the frustrated pedestrians. With every step, he chased the echo of the pursuit, the invisible breadcrumbs of the Tai Li rippling through the crowd as the angered people looked more recent.

The narrow streets twisted into a sharp bend, leading to a group of red-faced construction workers in battered helmets, sweat-stained singlets, and heavy cargo trousers. They shouted furiously as two fleeing Rioters raced past them, with the Tai Li in pursuit. The chase carried them over a precarious, half-finished bridge suspended between two colossal groundscrapers.

They jumped that gap!

Keung weaved through the crowd of angry workers, shoving aside anyone in his path. When he reached the jagged edge of the bridge, he jumped.

The world slowed as he sailed over a vertiginous drop of 62 levels… his boots slamming on the far side, rolling through the landing before snapping back into a sprint. His muscles burned, but the wild thrill of the chase gripped him, surging through his veins like fire.

A new scene of chaos unfolded before Keung – food stalls lined the narrow pathways, vibrant colours blending into a whirl of movement, with vendors haggling over the freshest produce of the cycle. Undeterred, Keung's focus zeroed in on Jin halfway through the market, just behind Han, vaulting over a table with sizzling shengwus. Cutting through the busy walkway, Keung chased after them through stalls piled high with fruits, meats, and vegetables. He wasn't far behind Jin, whose movements he attempted to shadow.

Jin vaulted over a table, and so did Keung, weaving between hanging shengwus, the scent of frying oil filling his senses.

Ahead, a vendor's table brimming with wild fungi blocked their path. Jin, nimble as a dusk-cat, sidestepped off the wall and vaulted over the table in one smooth motion. But Keung's split-second hesitation forced him on a different path and he dropped low, sliding under the table instead. His uniform scraped against the rough floor as he passed the wooden legs. A sudden jolt of pain shot through his head as he clipped the underside of the table, but he sprang back to his feet and kept doggedly chasing after Jin.

Keung glimpsed Jin veer left, cutting through the dense street and slipping into a chain of tight rooms joined through a straight line of aligned doorways. The two of them ran door through door, each room a different scene – seniors watching films, students in night tutoring, a busy eatery, a humming printing press. At the very end, Jin disappeared up a narrow staircase. He followed in pursuit, his body adjusting to the confined space of the stairwell. The passage was a tight squeeze, yet he didn't slow.

Han's shouts echoed loudly down the stairwell in the heat of the chase. 'STOP! WE WILL SHOOT! BY ORDER OF THE EMPEROR, STOP, YOU WILD SOUTHERN DOGS!'

As Keung ascended three steps a time, the echoes of the shouts faded, telling him the hunt had moved beyond the stairwell. He clambered up the last few flights and came to an abrupt halt at a shattered window, shards of glass still clinging to the frame. He popped his head outside and looked up.

Above him, the Rioters were scaling the sheer face of the groundscraper, moving with reckless speed. The Tai Li, undeterred, followed below them. The hunt was still on. Keung's eyes locked onto a narrow ledge just beyond the window. With a swift motion, he wedged his body through the frame, feeling the rough edges of the remaining glass graze his leather coat, and hopped onto the ledge.

There he stood, teetering on the edge of a deadly drop, the sprawling cityscape below him a blur of neon and LED lights and pedestrian activity. The sheer scale of South Kowloon unfolded beneath him, the tangled crisscross of bridges and mega-highways weaving through the vibrant city of Ho Man Ting.

An unexpected drizzle added a layer of danger to the chase. The ledge

beneath Keung's feet turned slick, a single misstep threatening a deadly plunge into the city below. Fear crept into Keung. His head started spinning as he gripped the window's edge with his left hand. *I can't do this!*

Suddenly, tiny pebbles rained down on his cap, drawing his gaze upwards. The sight of Jin's boots scrambling against the wall sparked his spirit back to life. He remembered why he was chasing after them: *Yutai is in danger!*

Keung started to climb. His hands found grip on a protruding brick, then a pipe, then a small ledge jutting from a window. Anything he could hold. One hand over another, foot by foot, he climbed – higher and faster, sure to not allow the wet surface betray his fingers.

He glanced up again, spotting Jin moving horizontally, inching his way to the adjacent side of the groundscraper. Without hesitation, Keung followed, shimmying along a narrow ledge. As he rounded the corner, another groundscraper loomed just three metres ahead, a yawning gap of open air separating him from it. At least 80 levels high. *I've never climbed heights like these! One wrong move and it's game over for me!*

Out of the top corner of his eye, Keung saw Han leap off the wall above him and land on a balcony on the groundscraper across. Jin climbed up and followed, but his leap fell short. He clung desperately to the railing, dangling for a split second before pulling himself up.

Keung wasted no time. He hauled himself up onto the same ledge and launched his body through the air, his boots hitting the balcony with a jarring thud. He stumbled but kept his balance, rushing through the door and into the chaos of someone's home.

The scene was pandemonium. A young woman stood on a couch, clutching two children and shrieking at the top of her lungs, waving a wooden spoon like a sword. Jin vaulted over the dining table and charged toward the front door, slamming it open. Keung sprinted after him, but his foot caught the edge of the table, sending him crashing hard to the floor. He rolled with the fall, springing back up and sprinting after Jin, the woman's screams fading behind him.

Outside on the street was Jin, hunched over, heaving and panting as if he had run a marathon. Keung allowed his pace to slacken to a jog as he

approached the winded Tai Li. Giving him an encouraging pat on the back, Keung also sucked in great lungfuls of air, his gaze scanning the surroundings.

'I… *hnnnnn,* lost them…' Jin wheezed, finally standing up straight. Keung scanned the crowded street in both directions. No signs of the chase.

'Call Han,' Keung instructed. 'Hopefully, we can still catch up…' His words slowly faded as he realised something very wrong was happening around them.

Random members of the crowd around them stepped out to surround the pair, wearing black robes and brandishing single daggers in their hands. Some had large bats. At first there were two, then it was four, and now there were eight.

Fuck.

Crowds of civilians began to close in, sensing the tension. The white beams of their recording torches lit up the scene, forming a ring of light like the walls of an arena. Within moments, the Kowlooni Network was flooded with livestreams of this inevitable showdown – A Kingmaker against multiple Yang militants, a fight never captured before.

Leaning towards Jin, Keung whispered, 'Don't kill them. Incapacitate. We need to bring them in alive. You take four.'

Jin nodded. Keung had trained to fight in sync with other Kingmakers, but right now, all he had was a Tai Li who was trained in different tactics and different rhythms. *I hope this works.*

One of the Yangs rushed Keung, his dagger glinting in his hand. Another dashed to Jin, a heavy zuche bat in hand. The Tai Li wasted no time, ducking under a wild swing and unleashing a rapid series of kicks to the man's head.

Jin's wild kickboxing attacks drew Keung's attention for a split second – a mistake. Thick hands loop under Keung's arms, clasping the back of his head in a tight grip. He struggled, eyes wide, as the gruff voice behind him shouted to another Yang, 'Brother! I've got him! Go for the neck!'

Keung's heart pounded as he saw the dagger-wielding Yang close in, a twisted grin on his face. Jin was locked in a fight with three other Yangs.

Keung was on his own.

Just as the blade arced towards him, Keung snapped his legs up, delivering a hard kick to the advancing assailant's wrist. The dagger veered off course and missed his throat.

But the Yang wasn't done. He slashed again, this time coming from the opposite side. Keung fired another kick at the man's wrist, deflecting the blade once more. This time, the kick sent the dagger flying from the Yang's grip.

'What the fuck are you doing?!' the man holding Keung roared at his comrade.

'Hold him still!' the knife-wielder snarled as he snatched the blade from the ground. He lunged again, slashing across Keung's chest, but the blade scraped uselessly against the armour beneath Keung's trench coat.

'Y'can't slash armour, you *fucking* imbecile!' the man shouted from behind. 'Stab the prick!'

'Why won't you just die?!' the knife-wielder bellowed, charging again. This time, he aimed a vicious thrust at Keung's belly, who reacted by driving his knee up to knock the man's wrist upward. The attacker recovered quickly, switching the knife to his other hand and plunging it down toward base of Keung's neck.

Keung sucked in a breath, summoning every ounce of strength he had left. In one swift motion, he yanked himself down, pulling the man behind him forward and over him. The subduer's shoulder swung over Keung's head, not enough to unbalance him completely, but enough to drag him into the path of the incoming blade.

As the knife plunged deep into the man's rear shoulder, he howled in agony, his grip on Keung faltering. 'FUCK ME! WHAT ARE YOU DOING, YOU *IDIOT*?!' His enormous weight sagged against Keung, nearly pinning him down.

The knife-wielder released his grasp on the handle, leaving the blade embedded in his companion's shoulder. Just as the grip around his arms slacked, Keung drove a back-kick into the man's gut and rolled free, springing to his feet and scanning for the next threat.

Hearing a sharp grunt, Keung looked over his shoulder and saw Jin eat a

punch from one of the Yangs. Just as Keung turned to help him, a heavy bat slammed into his gut. Keung doubled over, just in time to take an uppercut to the jaw, followed by another Yang suplexing him over his shoulder.

He barely broke the fall with his arms, scrambling back to his feet. Another Yang's dagger swiped twice across his chest, and he stepped back twice just out of reach. He ducked and weaved between strikes, but another misstep sent him reeling again. Despite his rigorous training, Keung felt his defences crumbling. A sharp kick cracked into his ribs, driving the air from his lungs. His blocks and dodges faltered, daggers swiped against his armour more frequently. A bat swung into his stomach, forcing a metallic taste into his mouth. He was no longer in control; this fight was turning into a brutal beat down, one wrong dagger thrust away from death.

Keung began to disassociate, having conversations with himself in his mind as he failed to react to the strikes landing on his body.

Have I always been this bad at fighting? Heck, Jin has been doing better than me this entire mission...

His now blurry vision flickered blue, his Eye was trying to activate. But Keung's exhaustion left him vulnerable, and every blink only seemed to invite more blows. His consciousness ebbed as he fought to stay upright, struggling to control his faulty Eye. Keung almost let the reigns of his body go, hoping the onslaught would stop.

Goddammit, this piece of shit Eye just turns on when it wants to. Maybe Jin will finish up and help me—

A dagger thrust deep into Keung's side until the handle touched his body.

Then, like a switch flipping, his Eye blazed to life. A riot of colours burst into his vision, electric blue and searing red outlining his attackers. His body moved on instinct, driven by the Eye's precision. It took over, guiding Keung's strikes with terrifying efficiency.

A Yang swung a bat towards Keung's head. He caught it with open palms, kicked the arms holding it, and then returned the swing to the Yang. He crumpled to the floor, and Keung smashed the side of his head with five brutal pounds until it was a soup of skull, brain, and teeth. His limbs became weapons, cutting down the Yangs one by one.

The next tried to seize Keung from behind, but he swivelled in an instant, slipping behind his attacker. Locking his arms around the Yang's waist, Keung heaved him off the ground and slammed him backwards with a neck-shattering force.

Keung left each one lifeless. With each gut-wrenching execution, he wrestled against the Eye's control, desperate to reclaim his body.

Another Yang kicked Keung, but he caught it between his arm and body, sweeped the other leg off the floor and wasted no time before firing once through the head. The last Yang stood motionless in fear – most his comrades were dead. Keung's Eye aimed the hand cannon and fired between the eyes.

When the last Yang on Keung's side fell, he managed a hard blink and finally deactivated the Eye. He could finally *feel* the adrenaline and move his own body.

Jin, bloodied but standing, dropped the second-last Yang on his side. Keung slowly rejoined him with raised fists. The Tai Li glanced at him, eyes widening at the grievous state of Keung's face. Worst of all, a dagger was buried to the hilt in his right kidney.

The Tai Li turned back to the final Yang. 'Consider your odds carefully, scum,' he snarled as blood tricked from his lip. 'Surrender now, and I might just let the Kings take you. Lok and Ying have no mercy for you Yangs anymore.'

Panting, the remaining Yang glanced at something in the crowd.

'Fuck you all! Live long the cause!' he snarled.

A canister rolled out from the crowd, spewing thick, red smoke. Then the canister exploded in a blinding flash and shrouded the scene in crimson red dust. Jin made a desperate dash towards the device, flinging it far away into the crowds, but it was too late; it had already ejected most of its smoke.

'Sir!' Jin shouted from somewhere near him. 'I've lost visual!'

The smoke stung Keung's eyes and he blinked hard. 'They're trying to escape!' he croaked. 'Arrest them! They've taken a Kingmaker captive!'